# COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN FOR EQUITY

*A Framework for Municipalities and School Districts*

Liam R. F. Bird

LRFB Equity Consulting, LLC

Feb 2026

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

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

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

That question first took form for me in 2011, during graduate school in public policy at Northwestern. I had already noticed the dissonance between what public institutions claimed to value and the lived experience of Black communities on the South and West Sides of Chicago. The disconnect was more than theoretical—it was structural, generational, and increasingly fatal. In 2013, the Chicago Board of Education—under mayoral control—closed 49 schools in a single vote. Ten of those schools were in Greater Englewood (the collective name for Englewood and West Englewood on Chicago's South Side). What was described as an efficiency strategy to address underutilization and budget shortfalls was an act of racial violence masquerading as policy reform.

In my thesis, I argued that these closures were not simply poor policy decisions—they were racialized attacks on Black neighborhoods. I named what many were too polite or too afraid to say: that Chicago's school closure strategy reflected a broader pattern of state abandonment, spatialized segregation, and economic containment of Black families, exacerbating outward migration – a study found 250,000 Black families left in 10 years (Toussaint-Comeau, 2020). I drew on the historical and legal precedent of redlining, consent decrees, and the racialized geography of opportunity in urban America. And I made the case that any process moving forward—whether labeled "reform," "equity," or "DEI"—must be rooted in community-led engagement and structural redress.

That research would go on to be presented at national and international conferences. But more importantly, it would become the procedural and philosophical foundation for everything I would later do within the system itself. Years later, I found myself in the very buildings and boardrooms where those policies were made—this time as a founding member of the Chicago Public Schools Office of Equity. This was made possible by the founding Chief Equity Officer, Dr. Maurice Swinney, whom I first worked with in my time at the University of Chicago's Network for College Success when he was the principal of Tilden High School on Chicago's South Side. He believed in my work, and our small but mighty office worked across the entire system, operational and academic.

My work has been guided by that original question ever since. Not how we make inequitable systems more efficient. Not how we retrofit institutions to look more inclusive on paper. The focus of this book is how we co-design for equity from the

ground up—with the people most impacted by inequity as co-authors, not afterthoughts. That is the question this book explores. And that is the work that must define our next era of public leadership.

## History and Intellectual Lineage of Community Co-Design

When it comes to the history of the term "co-design," the idea of "designing with, not for" has roots stretching back over half a century. It originated from Scandinavian countries in the late 1960s and 1970s and was called cooperative design. The approach arose from a political need to promote more equitable workplace practices for employees. An important example of early cooperative design is the UTOPIA project that happened within the newspaper industry, where trade union members partnered with researchers and designers to design IT solutions based on the needs and aspirations of the employees for whom the tool was intended. The process of cooperative design crystallized methods, including future workshops and collaborative prototyping, which were designed to produce human-centered solutions in real time in collaboration with the voices of implementers (Bødker et al., 2000).

Enduring principles of the cooperative design era included acknowledging power in the process and ensuring protections for those most impacted in the process of design itself, as well as centering process and outcomes in their needs and aspirations. It also injected a commitment to social equity into design practice, foreshadowing today's equity-focused co-design efforts.

In the social sciences, action research and community-centered problem-solving were simultaneously being created. One pioneer of action research, Kurt Lewin, stated in the 1940s, "No research without action, no action without research," which highlights the symbiosis between social change and knowledge production. Paulo Freire, in the 1970s, advanced participatory and action-based research through critical pedagogy and insisted that those furthest from opportunity must co-create knowledge about "their conditions" on the path to liberation. Freire's concept of critical consciousness holds that a technocratic advancement of liberation—outside experts managing the means of knowledge production toward the Promised Land—can never be achieved if those who seek liberation are not co-creators.

When cooperative design entered the United States in the 1970s, the terminology shifted to participatory design—in part because cooperative design was viewed as too radical or collectivist. Participatory Action Research (PAR) theorists like Davyd Greenwood and Morten Levin developed collaborative inquiry methodologies in the field of community development, guided by the non-negotiable principle that in any research study or inquiry process, the research participant should be received as an equal partner (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Community co-design, as it is presented in this book, borrows from the

intellectual lineage of cooperative design and participatory action research the idea that a best practice in inquiry-based design assumes the impacted stakeholders help to define the problem or "equity challenge" itself, rather than technocratic experts designing it in the isolated "ivory tower."

Another intersecting field that informs community co-design, as the inquiry-based community practice is presented in this book, is behavioral economics, which integrates insights from psychology, neuroscience, and economics to better situate how the psychology of the brain and cognitive limitations shape decision-making, especially as it applies to the economy. The practices of racial capitalism show up in the Hunger Games scenarios common in a racial capitalist society to encourage a "few geniuses from the rubbish," as Thomas Jefferson once lauded as the purpose of our educational institutions. Behavioral economics asks us to abandon the notion of homo economicus, or the perfectly rational human, in our economic models and understand our cognitive, temporal, and socioeconomic situatedness. From cognitive science, we understand the limitations and imperfections that, in themselves, may exemplify corollaries of consciousness itself. This is important, because it prevails in our base beliefs at the root of our culture—and the root of the pyramid of white supremacy—that in a system, an imperfection is caused by the individual (i.e., they are not perfectly logical in their system of reality), and this is what causes the imperfection in the system, rather than questioning the system itself. Behavioral economics begins, then, to reframe public policy and practice to be human-centered design—we design systems, so they foster the processes and outcomes we are trying to accomplish. The field of behavioral economics does not explicitly embrace participatory ideals, though it does build on using best practices from all fields to advance human-centered design (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Pre-dating behavioral economics is the broader field of cognitive science, established in the 1980s, that seeks to elucidate the mind and its corollaries, including consciousness, as well as the role of cognitive biases in decision-making (Kahneman, 2011).

The interdisciplinary approach to community co-design, as I work to crystallize the term in this book—as it is seldom referenced in academic literature explicitly—draws from human-centered design approaches, including cooperative design and participatory design. It also borrows from the sciences, cognitive science, and behavioral economics, with an explicit focus on designing systems that meet the needs of those they are meant to serve, while instantiating self-interest as a human-centered choice using design principles. For example, behavioral economics introduces the idea of choice overload and decision fatigue, which must inform how we design community co-design in our institutions, along with other concepts like loss aversion and status quo bias, which emphasize that we don't like too many choices and would rather maintain the status quo than risk losing something—even when there is the potential to gain.

The major difference between community co-design as it is presented here and early cooperative design and participatory action research approaches is the explicit non-negotiable of addressing racism and systems of oppression, with a focus on those furthest from opportunity. In this case, rather than focusing explicitly on employees, community co-design recognizes that in many institutions, those designing solutions often don't have the lived experience to reflect the unique needs and aspirations of those furthest from opportunity. In this sense, community co-design is firmly situated in grassroots movements that operationalized community-led change through direct action, participatory democracy, and institutional disruption, 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* 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).
- *The Free Palestine Movement* challenges Islamophobia and Zionism through community-based advocacy within institutions and on university campuses globally.

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). 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 Black Panther Party established community centers, a breakfast program, educational programs, and housing solutions with a focus on Black people. It also centered on non-negotiables, known as the Ten-Point Program, and it was co-created through collaborative co-design among members. The non-negotiables focused on Black liberation, which is necessary in areas from employment to housing and education. Community co-design for equity also assumes non-negotiables—including Black liberation and the liberation of most impacted communities—and a commitment to not create further harm for those who have already experienced the brunt of a system that Thomas Jefferson described as successful when "raking a few geniuses from the rubbish."

The specific practice of "community co-design" has been used more recently in practice-based inquiry contexts, and it remains nascent and is beginning to crystallize. For example, the World Economic Forum defined it in 2023 as "a sub-discipline of human-centered design" focused on those furthest from opportunity (WEF, 2023). A municipal toolkit from Rochester, Minnesota, describes community co-design as a human-centered design methodology emphasizing protocols for "shared decision-making" with diverse and representative community-based voices to co-create equitable solutions in policy and practice. The term was also very important to the Chicago Public Schools Equity Framework (2019), which I was a co-author of, with the focus of applying an equity lens to build public trust in the wake of inequitable decisions, from privatization to school closures.

The term "community co-design" has been gaining traction in practice-based research contexts related to urban agriculture, healthcare, and education. A participatory inquiry process in the UK found that co-designing urban agriculture can promote positive health outcomes. Earlier instances of the term appeared in applied research rather than as well-theorized constructs. A 2013 guide funded by the UK government, Community Co-Design: A Guide to Working Collaboratively Through Design, documented housing-related services being co-designed with residents and marshaled by local authorities. In the guide, "community co-design" is described as an experimental methodology, which confirms the nascent nature of the practice-based field (UK Design Council, 2013).

Given the relative scarcity of the term within academic literature and a lack of a comprehensive framework uniting human-centered design, non-negotiables of racial equity, and grassroots organizing into a single methodology, this book represents an effort to formalize and champion this emerging practice. By explicitly naming and theorizing Community Co-Design for Equity, I am attempting to connect the dots between cooperative and participatory design and equity-driven community organizing, providing language for what has, until now, been an under-defined practice. In short, community co-design is an emergent, practice-led term.

Community co-design also sits at the intersection of what Dr. King described in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963) as the necessary "strategy and tactics" to advance equitable change through the organizing and actions of "inside innovators, outside agitators, and overall orchestrators." The agitator (the outsider) highlights the problem and demands change from outside the system. The innovator (the insider) works on actionable solutions from within structures. And the orchestrator coordinates across domains to help scale and unify the change. A question becomes, how do we structure a process that shifts us from competition to collaboration and transforms power through the advocacy of these three groups – inside innovators, outside agitators, and overall orchestrators?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, foresaw the need for this inside-outside partnership. Decades later, political scientist John Kingdon offered a useful metaphor for when such partnerships can spark change. Kingdon (1984) described the opening of a policy window—a unique moment when problems, solutions, and political will all align, creating the possibility for transformative reform (Kingdon, 1984). We witnessed such a moment in 2020: a wave of protest energy from outside collided with newfound willingness (however performative) inside institutions, briefly opening a door for change. As Kingdon theorized, real change becomes possible only when these streams converge. My approach to community co-design is about making sure that when that window opens, and we have already been in the mirror, the solutions on the table are co-created by the community that demanded change in the first place, and often situated the equity challenge. It serves as the bridge between protest and policy, ensuring that the wave of institutional responses to public pressure is guided by those who sparked it, not diluted by bureaucratic inertia. In this way, community co-design occupies the critical nexus of inside innovators, outside agitators, and the overall orchestrators who bring them together. It is where grassroots wisdom and institutional power meet, and where a shared blueprint for change can finally be co-authored.

## School Closures and the Embodied Consequences of Disinvestment

Between 2013 and 2018, 53 public schools were closed in Chicago—the largest wave of school closures in U.S. history. This wasn't a random or evenly distributed policy. It was a pattern, and Greater Englewood bore the brunt. In just five years, ten schools in Englewood and West Englewood (the two neighborhoods comprising Greater Englewood) were shuttered, gutting the educational infrastructure of a single Black community.

Next up was Austin, which was once a bustling African American community that experienced white flight, and whose population dropped precipitously. Austin experienced five school closures in 2013. I grew up just across the street in Oak Park—originally born in Pilsen, Chicago. There are cul-de-sacs along Austin Avenue. Everyone knows that these were set up to separate the Black population of the Austin neighborhood from the mostly white—at the time, though diversifying—Oak Park.

These decisions were made in closed-door meetings, under the technocratic logic of budget constraints and utilization metrics. But if we track who was most affected—who lost access to institutions that functioned as safe havens, community centers, and cultural anchors—it becomes clear: this was not simply institutional failure. It was embodied oppression.

What does that mean? It means that disinvestment shows up in the body. It means that closing a school doesn't just shift enrollment—it shocks the nervous system of a

community already in trauma. In 2019, economist Raj Chetty and colleagues published data revealing what many of us knew intuitively: Black boys in America, regardless of wealth or zip code, face the steepest barriers to upward mobility—they are the least likely to rise, even when born into affluent families (Chetty et al., 2019).

By 2021, researchers were linking this opportunity disparity to physiological weathering—the stress-induced deterioration of the body caused by prolonged exposure to structural racism and poverty (Geronimus, 2021). Among Black men, this weathering manifests in higher rates of heart disease, strokes, and early mortality. The body, as Dr. Bessel van der Kolk might say, keeps the score—not just of individual trauma, but of policy decisions (van der Kolk, 2014). Every closure, every budget cut, every act of systemic neglect writes itself into cells and organs. It is a physical record of disinvestment.

That's why I no longer use the term "achievement gap." That phrase implies something is inherently lacking in the students—that they failed to hit a mark on a level playing field. It's the language that masks how the baton race was rigged from the start. During my time at CPS, I worked to change this discourse, introducing the term opportunity difference to support the institution in turning a new leaf. Opportunity difference shifts the focus from supposed student deficiencies to the unequal conditions that institutions create. It asks: Who had access to the resources, safety, and support needed to shift from surviving to thriving in the first place? It forces us to acknowledge that the vast disparities in outcomes are not natural; they are designed. And if they are designed, they can be redesigned. These differences are not gaps between individuals' efforts or abilities—they are wounds inflicted by policy, sustained by bureaucracy, and too often papered over by reforms that claim to be neutral but are anything but.

In Greater Englewood, those wounds were fresh and deep. The school closures came suddenly and silently, leaving behind more than vacant buildings. A 2014 city report found that of Chicago's 6,000 empty buildings, nearly one-third were concentrated in Englewood and West Englewood—a stark symbol of what was being hollowed out (City of Chicago, 2014). Walking through those neighborhoods, you see reminders of what was taken: padlocked doors of beloved schools, blocks pockmarked by vacant lots, social fabrics torn. Community members understood these closures not as isolated events, but as part of a long pattern of systemic racism impacting Greater Englewood.

One elected official put it bluntly during a conversation with me: "Thirty students got shot on their way to Harper High School—nine of them died. These schools are the safe havens for children… closing that school would be even more of a detriment." In other words, closing a school in Englewood wasn't about test scores or budgets; it was about life and death, about community survival. The trust in public institutions—already brittle—shattered. Many residents described the policy as a "racialized attack,"

recognizing that Black neighborhoods always seem to bear the brunt of these so-called austerity measures.

If we zoom out, we see how all the pieces connect: systemic racism, educational disinvestment, health disparities, and diminished life outcomes. In Chicago, the life expectancy of residents in the affluent, majority-white Streeterville neighborhood is around 90 years, while in West Englewood—just nine miles away—it's roughly 60. A thirty-year gap in lifespan. This is not a mystery; it is segregation and neglect made flesh. It reflects decades of deliberate policy choices: where hospitals are funded and where they are closed, which schools get state-of-the-art facilities and which are left to crumble, which communities have healthy food and clean air, and which do not. The geography of opportunity in our city maps directly onto these outcomes.

All of this context is crucial because it underscores why community co-design for equity is not a feel-good option—it is a necessity. The core theory of this framework is simple: those furthest from opportunity should be first in line to shape the solutions. They have borne compounded disadvantage; they carry what Dr. Bettina Love calls the "spirit murder" inflicted by systemic racism (Love, 2019).

## Who I Am and Where I'm From

I was born in Chicago (in the Pilsen neighborhood)—under a table because the ambulance never came. My mother went into labor, and the system didn't show up. My father breathed life into me when I was turning blue. That was my first experience with inequity. We moved across the western border of Chicago to Oak Park when I was four, across an invisible but deeply felt border from the disinvested neighborhoods of Chicago to a suburb that prided itself on diversity but still carried the contradictions of America's racial binary.

Growing up Black and biracial in a diverse yet segregated environment, and in an interracial family, made race central to my existence from very early on. As James Baldwin wrote, you eventually realize "you were the Indians"—meaning, you come to understand that you are cast as the outsider (as Audre Lorde described), the problem, in someone else's narrative. I learned that lesson viscerally around the age of 12, when I was stopped and frisked by police in Oak Park simply for being Black in the "wrong" place. They left me in the cold after determining I was no threat, warning me to "stay out of trouble," and the female officer jogged along. It was a shocking moment—a child confronted with the reality of how I was seen by society. As some theories of racial identity development describe, these were formative experiences I needed to make meaning of, as such experiences left an indelible mark on my psyche, contributing to what Dr. Bettina Love describes as spirit murder.

My identity was interrogated from the beginning—too Black in some rooms, not Black enough in others. I was bullied in elementary school, even as I excelled academically. I learned early that nothing protects you from racialized harm. But I also learned how to move between spaces, between expectations, between versions of myself. That navigation became both a survival tactic and a seed for my future practice.

By high school, I had become a three-sport athlete, a musician, and a student leader. I started a student club called Young Visionaries at Oak Park and River Forest High School and helped organize a school-wide Day of Reflection on racial and social identity (the school was documented in the film *America to Me* by Steve James, with a focus on achievement and opportunity differences). That same year, at sixteen, I stood on a stage in front of 4,000 students and delivered the speech that won the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Oratorical Contest. My refrain was simple but true:

> *"It's much easier to dream than to wake up to this nightmare.*
> *Freedom is not free. It requires work, courage, and sacrifice.*
> *This is why a collective effort is needed today!"*

I also became an active hip-hop artist, beginning at sixteen, and performed throughout the state of Illinois, including winning the Chicago Battle of the Bands in 2016. Scholars like Pedro Noguera and Bettina Love describe hip hop as a process to sublimate, ventilate, and transform—turning the threat of stereotypes into threat-type-stereo. Through music and organizing, I found ways to transmute pain into purpose and stereotype threat into what I call "threat-type stereo."

Later, I would come to understand these truths more formally through philosophy: through Sartre's notions of "in-itself" and "for-itself," through Kant's call to escape self-imposed nonage, and through Maslow's model of self-actualization. But I lived the contradictions long before I studied them. I am the product of a country that only recently (within my parents' lifetime) legalized interracial marriage, and yet still uses the one-drop rule to define Blackness. That contradiction lives in my skin. And so does the responsibility to use that skin—this skin—as a site of reflection, resistance, and repair.

I do not come to equity work as a savior. I come as someone who has survived systems that weren't built to see me. I come as someone who's had to pour from his essence before he learned to pour from his excess – an approach I learned about as a fellow in the Surge Institute in 2017. I come as someone who knows that if we do not begin with the mirror, we will never be ready for the window, let alone the work. This is where the framework begins: in the skin we are in, in the stories we carry, and in the questions that shaped us before we ever had the language to name them. The work requires us to first look into the mirror and continuously—the skin we are in, our formative experiences, how and why our stance and scheme evolved, and what the catalytic and interruptive

experiences were. Then, when we look out the window, we are ready to be culturally and developmentally responsive.

## From Listening to Policy: Greater Englewood and Beyond

In 2018, as a Surge Fellow, I launched the Greater Englewood Listening Campaign on Education Priorities. I wasn't new to the conditions in Englewood—having lived, worked, and coached in schools across the South and West Sides—but I knew this campaign had to be different. Not performative, pre-scripted, or prescriptive.

I conducted over 30 empathy interviews with educators, organizers, students, families, elected officials, nonprofit leaders, and alumni—those who had been directly impacted by school closures, chronic disinvestment, and institutional neglect. These were not one-off focus groups. These were sustained, qualitative engagements across basements, block meetings, offices, classrooms, and community events. The process wasn't always comfortable, and it wasn't designed to be. As I wrote at the time, in an artistic expression of listening campaign findings linked with the 2018 report:

> *"Engaged in a campaign of listening*
> *Treat it like a discipline/*
> *Appreciate the dissonance*
> *And stand in the middle."*

Because that's where transformation lives—in the friction, in the contradiction, in the spaces we are usually taught to avoid. Listening, real listening, requires a shift in power. You don't confirm your assumptions; you let them be undone and learn to avoid "solution-itis." What emerged from that campaign was a powerful, coherent message: stop racialized attacks on Black neighborhoods, structure participatory democracy, and ensure culturally responsive educational leaders.

The community didn't need another vision statement. They needed procedures that protect, processes that repair, and invitations to co-create. They needed school systems that honor community epistemologies. I compiled the findings, synthesized them into key themes, and shared the report with district leadership and the Board of Education. The message was clear: Englewood had not just been underserved—it had been deliberately excluded. And yet, the solutions were already present in the community, if only we were willing to listen.

Later that year, I was hired by Chicago Public Schools as a founding team member of the Office of Equity. It was the first office in CPS history dedicated solely to racial equity. I joined as an Equity Policy Strategist and later became Director of Racial Equity Initiatives. The listening campaign had taught me that systemic change requires both

grassroots wisdom and institutional access, and the two must be in constant conversation. Inside CPS, I co-authored the CPS Equity Framework, a four-dimensional model that codified liberatory thinking, inclusive partnerships, fair policies and systems, and resource equity, as well as the guiding principles of targeted universalism and racial equity as the pillars of districtwide equity work. But more than that, I worked to institutionalize equity as both process and outcome.

We didn't just say we valued community voice—we designed mechanisms to formalize it, including several updated policies, board rules, and governance documents. We created a policy review structure that required empathy interviews, stakeholder feedback, and rubric-based equity audits for every board policy revision. We implemented inclusive partnerships with dozens of community-based organizations. We required districtwide listening campaigns, not as symbolic gestures but as decision-making prerequisites. In every space, I carried the voices from Greater Englewood with me—not as a metaphor, but as a mandate. Because what I heard in that campaign wasn't just about one neighborhood—it was about a pattern. A pattern of dispossession, of top-down decision-making, of systemic amnesia about who is impacted when policy moves without accountability.

Greater Englewood became the proof point. But the problem—and the potential—was always bigger. And so, the Community Co-Design for Equity Framework was born not from a white paper or a strategic retreat, but from the lived reality of people who had been locked out, talked over, and harmed by systems that claimed to serve them. This framework isn't just inspired by the listening campaign. It is built from it. Every phase, every protocol, every principle was tested in real time, refined by the community, and eventually institutionalized in the largest school district in Illinois.

The work started on the block. But it didn't end there. It moved into boardrooms, budgets, capital planning, policies, systems, and leadership development. And wherever I went, the throughline remained: Start with listening. Stay with the community. Build with—not over.

## Inside the System: Designing for Equity in Policy and Budget

When I stepped into my role as Director of Racial Equity Initiatives at Chicago Public Schools, I wasn't coming in to theorize about equity—I was there to build it into the actual architecture of the system. I brought with me not just a framework, but a methodology. Not just convictions, but a set of tested, community-rooted practices. We began with policy.

I led the revision of over 85 board-level policies through a rigorous equity review process that I helped design. At the center of that process was the Equity Policy Rubric

Workbook—a tool I co-developed to ensure every policy owner within CPS could assess, interrogate, and transform their policies in alignment with the CPS Equity Framework. This wasn't a suggestion. It was a system-wide expectation. Every revision required three core things: an internal equity audit, stakeholder engagement, and a clear rationale for how the policy would promote more equitable outcomes. But policy alone is not equity. So, we turned to resources. I jumped into the new Equity Policy Strategist role right away. On Day 2, our Chief Equity Officer invited me to a meeting with the Chief Operating Officer, where we were tasked with developing a comprehensive Resource Equity assessment for the district, in three weeks, to present to the new mayor, Lori Lightfoot. The goal was to design a more equitable funding process, one that could direct resources where they were needed most. I led a co-design process with various community organizations and later a district-wide survey to create what became the CPS Opportunity Index. This index used 11 socioeconomic and contextual indicators – including racial segregation, the impact of past school closures, local funding disparities, and more – to quantify opportunity differences across schools. We then used the Opportunity Index to drive how capital improvement funds were allocated, ensuring that investments would prioritize the schools and neighborhoods furthest from opportunity. In essence, we were writing equity into the DNA of the budgeting process. It wasn't just a theoretical exercise; it directly informed the distribution of an $820 million capital budget, making it the most equity-centered capital plan in CPS history up to that point. To do this, we had to overcome deep mistrust.

Decades of racism and broken promises had left communities understandably wary of CPS initiatives. We knew that nothing short of true community partnership would work, so we collaborated with groups like Enlace, Chicago United for Equity, the Kirwan Institute, the Great Cities Institute, My Brother's Keeper, Teach Plus, Educators for Excellence, and Thrive Chicago. These partners brought their own resources and insights, hosting co-design labs where we met with students, parents, alumni, and activists to hear their ideas and vet our plans. We acknowledged openly that CPS had a long history of racist and discriminatory practices – for instance, the 1980 federal Consent Decree that found CPS guilty of segregating Black and Latino students, and the 1991 CPS Multicultural Education and Diversity policy that was supposed to address some of those issues.

We also confronted more recent history: neoliberal policies from the Gates Compact to school closures, rapid and vast privatization, and separate and unequal pathways and offerings for South and West Side schools receiving "more technical" education, more likely to wear a uniform each day, more likely to go through a metal turnstile each morning, and less likely to have schools replete with students and with robust academic, extracurricular, and sports programs. We could draw a direct line, for example, from student-based budgeting (which tied school funds to enrollment numbers) to the separate and unequal pathways in our high schools – where South and West Side schools ended

up with fewer academic and extracurricular offerings, more security measures like metal detectors, and more "vocational" tracks, while selective schools (often whiter and wealthier) flourished with abundance. We applied the Equity Framework and the Opportunity Index to everything:

- Capital budgeting and school infrastructure planning
- Charter school policies and questions of oversight and accountability
- The School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), which we ultimately abolished in favor of a more community-responsive school support model
- The Student Code of Conduct, including how we understand safety, dignity, and behavioral support
- The Naming and Renaming of Schools, Mascots, and CPS Spaces Policy, which sets a new standard for affirming the identities of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students

By late 2018 and 2019, I found myself co-leading the redesign of major CPS policies, often through this emergent co-design approach. One was the update of the 1991 diversity policy into a new Culturally Responsive Education and Diversity Policy. We knew that if the process of developing this policy wasn't itself inclusive and equity-driven, the policy would ring hollow. So, we organized a massive stakeholder engagement effort: 50 focus groups across the city, a survey with nearly 2,000 responses, and about 500 empathy interviews. Altogether, over 10,000 people had a voice in shaping that policy. It was, in many ways, as revolutionary for CPS how we engaged as what we produced. Process and outcome were of equal importance. This is a key principle: if you focus only on outcomes and ignore process, you often end up replicating the very inequities you set out to solve.

The infamous 2013 school closings happened in part because leaders fixated on an "outcome" (saving money, boosting test scores) and neglected the process (meaningful community engagement, understanding holistic impact) – and thereby caused immense harm, which was affirmed by a 2014 Chicago Consortium on School Research report. We refused to repeat that. In every policy redesign I was part of – from the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) to student discipline codes – we emphasized robust co-design and equity analysis. For the SQRP, which had long been criticized as stigmatizing majority-Black schools with an "accountability" label, I served as a technical advisor, ensuring that community input and equity checkpoints were built into the revision process. Ultimately, in 2021-22, CPS decided to abolish the old SQRP system. What replaced it was not just a new metric or rating, but an entirely different approach: one that focused on process over punitive outcomes. We began piloting what was essentially an Equity Inquiry process for school evaluation, looking at each school's unique context, needs, and assets (especially those identified by the community), rather than relying on a

one-size-fits-all score. It was a paradigm shift: from chasing "achievement" metrics to addressing opportunity differences.

In every case, we asked the same foundational question: Who is furthest from opportunity, and how do we know? That question wasn't rhetorical. It was procedural. It required data, yes—but also deep listening. It meant disaggregating, historicizing, and humanizing our analysis. It meant we couldn't rely on a colorblind or "race-neutral" interpretation of equity. It meant our decisions had to be traceable to the lived experiences of those most impacted. We didn't build this process as a one-time initiative. We worked to institutionalize it—to ensure that long after the names changed and administrations rotated, the structure would remain.

Because equity doesn't live in rhetoric. It lives in who's at the table, in how decisions are made, in what data gets counted, and in where the money goes. And unless we build systems that are designed to do that kind of work—not just one time, but continuously—we are not practicing equity. We are only performing it. This was the charge. And for four years, from inside the fourth-largest school district in the country, we took that charge seriously. We built the infrastructure. We led professional learning experiences for staff. We updated the policy while requiring equity audits and co-design. We marshaled resource equity. And we proved that a public institution—when it listens, when it's honest, when it shares power— can begin to repair harm and rebuild trust. That's what it means to design for equity.

## A Municipal and Educational Mandate

During the years I served in Chicago Public Schools, it remained the only district in Illinois under full mayoral control. That meant there was no elected school board. No direct accountability to families. No formal mechanism for communities to influence school governance. The Board of Education was appointed by the mayor, and at the time of the Greater Englewood Listening Campaign, CPS was functioning as both a school system and a municipal body—an arm of city government, making decisions with wide-reaching implications for everything from housing to policing to workforce development.

This dual identity—municipal and educational—shaped how we approached the work. We understood that we weren't just transforming classrooms or lesson plans. We were transforming governance itself. That meant policy changes had to reverberate beyond the Department of Teaching and Learning. They had to show up in capital budgeting, labor practices, enrollment strategy, public trust-building, and how the district communicated across historically harmed neighborhoods. The communities we served made one thing clear: they were done with technocratic paternalism— the kind that dresses up harm in data, and calls disenfranchisement "strategic alignment." They demanded a shift toward

participatory democracy, and rightly so. Our response wasn't a gesture. It was a structure. We built empathy interviews into policy development. We convened community co-design labs before the first draft of any major decision. We required policy accountability rooted in the experiences of those most impacted, because the communities closest to the problem often carry the wisdom needed for the solution.

It wasn't always clean. It wasn't always welcomed. But it was necessary. Because systems cannot claim to be equitable when the same hands continue to hold all the power. We had to disrupt that cycle. We had to turn inward to the institution itself and ask: Who gets to decide? We did not always get it perfect. But we built mechanisms of shared ownership that remain in place to this day. And we proved that an institution—even one as large and historically complex as CPS— can become more democratic and restore harm when it chooses to.

## Philosophical and Political Foundations

We begin this work not with optics, but with ontology. Equity is not a checklist. It is a way of being and doing. And before any institution engages with equity externally, it must confront its internal assumptions—about power, about human value, about who matters and why. My academic grounding in philosophy taught me to ask these questions early and often. Sartre taught us about the in-itself and for-itself—that to transcend the positions we are assigned, we must act with consciousness, with freedom, with intentionality. Kant reminded us that maturity means escaping "self-imposed nonage," or the refusal to think for ourselves. Maslow gave us a model of self-actualization, but what he didn't include was how systemic violence can prevent the basic needs from ever being met, especially for communities of color.

These frameworks matter in practice. If we accept, as neuroscience demonstrates, that approximately 50% of the brain's visual processing is dedicated to facial recognition, then we begin to understand the centrality of visibility to both consciousness and relationship. Thomas Nagel, in his essay What Is It Like to Be a Bat? Explored the concept of qualia—the subjective elements of consciousness—and argued that these lived experiences cannot be reduced to materialist explanations. In doing so, he underscored that physicalism is ultimately grounded in subjectivism: a posteriori knowledge, or knowledge gained through experience, cannot be separated from any account of consciousness.

We don't know what it's like to be a bat. And for humans, the elasticity and expressiveness of the face are critical for social-emotional learning and connection. So, imagine what a human face would look like to a bat—likely something templated and flat, with less nuance or depth. Likewise, humans are shaped by anchoring heuristics—automatic mental shortcuts—rooted in socialization and systemic oppression.

These heuristics are so powerful that, when some people see someone who is homeless or a Black person, their brain doesn't activate the same regions it would for others. The parts of the brain that should light up—those associated with empathy, recognition, and relationship—often don't respond at all. Apply that to Claude Steele's work on stereotype threat, and to the 2021 study linking physiological weathering to racism: they don't see us or feel for us—physiologically, neurologically—and we can now measure that. Steele shows that when we are not seen, we are less likely to perform academically, and that absence of visibility becomes a measurable opportunity difference. I worked in many educational environments in Chicago and across the country, and had deficit beliefs about what students can accomplish, especially students with the most melanin who experience the full spectrum from racist policies to implicit biases, to stereotype threat, to othering and aspiring toward belonging. Especially in systems and institutions that don't even bother to measure it.

From an Afrofuturist lens, it's not hard to imagine when forms of racism and discrimination – whether individual, interpersonal, or institutional – could be prosecuted with similar intent to a physical attack. That's what the Pyramid of White Supremacy is pointing out. The bricks on the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy (basic physical and social-emotional safety) are undermined by the bricks at the bottom of the Pyramid of white supremacy:  indifference to racism and systems of oppression.

It's about how we structure the very conditions of learning, growth, and belonging. And those conditions are never neutral. They are built on assumptions about whose needs matter most, and whose are treated as an afterthought—or worse, a problem to be managed. That's why we asked, over and over again: are our non-negotiables grounded in liberatory values? If they're not, then we're building systems that—by default—slide into fascism. And not the fascism of spectacle, but the quiet, insidious fascism of bureaucracy: the one that wears the mask of "efficiency" and "objectivity" while perpetuating harm. That's how racial capitalism cloaks itself —in metrics and models that seem neutral but are built on deep bias. In contrast, we worked to apply targeted universalism—a strategy that sets universal goals but targets strategies toward those most excluded.

If we were to construct a short but rigorous argument summarizing the non-negotiables of our work, it would include the following foundational truths that will be explained further in Chapter 3:

1. Opportunity differences situate and explain outcome differences.
2. Opportunity difference is the product of racism and systems of oppression.
3. Community epistemology must be embodied—narratives are necessary as a norm.
4. Power must be shared.
5. Clear, publicly trackable equity metrics must be established.

6. Focus on people, place, and period as dimensions of outcome and process.
7. Recognize our own liberatory consciousness; measure how we show up.
8. Rewire social construction, community co-design, and cultural humility.

This set of non-negotiables refuses the fantasy of sameness. It asks instead: What does justice look like for those with the least access to power, and how do we build from there? It means rejecting "the greatest good for the greatest number" if that principle leaves the most vulnerable behind. It means saying no to the low-hanging fruit if the fruit wasn't grown in shared soil to begin with. Equity, when rooted in liberatory consciousness, is not just a strategy. It's an equity stance.

## What This Book Is (And What It Isn't)

Let's be clear from the outset. This is not a memoir, though it draws from lived experience. This is not a manual, though it includes tools, protocols, and guiding questions. This is a roadmap. A framework built at the intersection of grassroots organizing, academic rigor, and institutional leadership. It is rooted in the belief that systems do not transform without tension, and that equity is not achieved through branding, but through shared power, principled design, and procedural courage.

I've lived on all sides of this work—inside the classroom, outside the protest line, across policy tables, and in the superintendent's office. I've sat in boardrooms where people spoke of "stakeholder engagement" without ever having met the stakeholders. I've witnessed communities blamed for the conditions they inherited. I've seen reform after reform promise change, only to be followed by retraction, rebranding, or retreat. This book is a response to all of that. But it's also an offering—a way forward. It is written for:

- ***Students and parents***, especially those furthest from opportunity, have been told their experiences are "anecdotal" while their schools are closed, their stories ignored, and their futures deferred.
- ***Superintendents and mayors*** who seek to build systems not just of performance, but of public trust, where community engagement is embedded in how decisions are made, not tacked on as an afterthought.
- ***Community organizers and advocates*** who are tired of being invited to "give input" only to go unheard, and who are ready to push institutions beyond gestures and into structural accountability.
- ***Teachers, paraprofessionals, and frontline staff*** who have lived through cycles of reform and know that no initiative works unless it centers on the realities of the people implementing it.
- ***Policy analysts, consultants, and public servants*** are struggling with how to make "equity" real in bureaucracies built on efficiency metrics and procedural delay.

This book is a bridge. From theory to practice. From framework to fidelity. From implementation intention. It won't give you easy answers—but it will help you ask the right questions. It won't pretend to be neutral, but it will invite honesty. It won't sell you a program, but it will share a process, one that has been tested in communities, in classrooms, and at the highest levels of public policy. The process unfolds across seven recursive phases—each corresponding to a chapter of the book—rather than a rigid set of steps. These phases are not a one-time checklist; they are ongoing conditions that enable authentic co-design and power-sharing.

## The Framework Ahead: Seven Phases

This is not a linear model. It is an iterative cycle of transformation grounded in justice, designed for institutions ready to shift from performative engagement to authentic power-sharing. The Community Co-Design for Equity Framework unfolds across seven recursive phases—each of which corresponds to a chapter in this book. These phases are not steps to complete. They are conditions to sustain. They are built on the premise that the people most impacted by systemic inequity already hold the insight and agency to shape what comes next. What they need is for institutions to listen differently, design differently, and govern differently.

- ***Chapter 1*** begins by looking inward at cultivating organizational readiness through critical self-reflection, challenging leaders to confront their biases and positionality before engaging the community.
- ***Chapter 2*** focuses on establishing the preconditions for co-design success, building relational trust and structural supports so that community members can participate as true partners.
- ***Chapter 3*** involves working with communities to define the equity challenge and context, rejecting deficit frames and naming the history and structures that underlie inequities.
- ***Chapter 4*** involves conducting equity audits and community listening, where quantitative data and community narratives are brought together as evidence for change.
- ***Chapter 5*** is the heart of the process: co-designing solutions with the community, moving from extraction to co-creation as we design interventions together.
- ***Chapter 6*** then addresses implementation and sustaining practice, ensuring that shared ownership continues through the rollout of solutions, with feedback loops and structures to maintain the commitments made.
- ***Chapter 7*** covers evaluation, monitoring, and iterative improvement, normalizing the practice of learning and adjusting in public, and embedding accountability through collective ownership.

In essence, the chapters mirror a cycle of transformation—from self to system, from listening to power-sharing—that any institution can adopt. Together, these seven phases form a roadmap for moving from performative engagement to just practice in our public institutions. This is not a book about "best practices." It is a book about just practice. And if you're ready to start—not over, but differently—then let's begin. The work is messy. It's relational. It's not designed to make institutions comfortable. It's designed to make them honest. These seven phases are a recursive system for equity—a map not for managing communities, but for walking with them toward the Promised Land. If we treat this as a checklist, we will fail. If we treat it as a discipline, we have a chance at justice. We must win.

# 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 sustained critical self-reflection about how their lived experiences, professional assumptions, and institutional roles shape their approach to equity. Co-design is not a quick fix or a discrete sequence of activities—it is fundamentally about shifting mindsets, redistributing power, and interrupting dominant patterns of decision-making. As such, foundational readiness is not an abstract precondition; it is a necessary process of naming, interrogating, and transforming how institutions work, beginning with those who lead them.

Stakeholders must be prepared to question the status quo, confront uncomfortable truths about privilege and oppression, and reckon with the historical and contemporary legacies of exclusion. As Sherry Arnstein famously argued in her Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), authentic participation entails not token consultation but a genuine transfer of power from authorities to the people. Those traditionally excluded must be deliberately, not accidentally, included. In educational and municipal contexts, this means examining how past and present policies have contributed to compounded disadvantage for specific communities, and committing to doing things differently before co-design ever begins. Those are the non-negotiables we will return to when identifying the equity challenge.

## 1.1. The Personal is Foundational

We can't begin the work of community co-design without what we call in the CPS Equity Framework – "liberatory thinking." bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* outlines what it means to show up as a culturally responsive, anti-racist educator and how our own identities are shaped through the work. In my own practice, this means beginning with the intersectional self while prioritizing race, because race continues to be the most predictive indicator of socioeconomic opportunity, access, and outcome.

You always start with liberatory thinking. It's a necessary precondition. Liberatory thinking means engaging in an equity pause, it means having the right infrastructure and team in place, and engaging in learning experiences over time and building the facilitative capacity to lead equity within an organization that doesn't cause more harm to those the effort is supposed to serve. Liberatory thinking means recognizing our predispositions, explicit and implicit biases, as well as how we intend to show up. We engage in it at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. The National Equity Project's "Lens of

Systemic Oppression" is a very helpful design tool for the purpose of exploring the ecosystem of inequity I have used throughout my career. We might ask in this phase who I am, who I need to be, and what I need to do through my educational practice to advance equity in both process and outcome, with a focus on those furthest from opportunity.

Critical self-reflection requires that we surface our situatedness—how we are positioned in relation to systems of power—and name the formative experiences that have shaped our awareness. For me, being stopped and frisked by the police as a 12-year-old in Oak Park was one such experience. It shocked me, and I truly didn't expect it, and it could never be unseen or unfelt. Another was a white philosophy professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who my junior year, accused me of plagiarism for a paper I wrote because it "went too far beyond the assignment" and "was likely the product of Cliff Notes." The truth was I wrote it entirely, though I felt I had to accept the opinion of the expert, and this is reflective of the Milgram and Stanford experiments, which show that those with power and authority dressed in suits and with degrees behind their name must have the answer. It's this kind of anti-intellectualism that co-design challenges. It asks us to exist together in what we call at the Center for Equity, Effectiveness, and Efficiency in Local Government where I am a Learning and Education Director, "dynamic inquiry." john powell coined "positive tension," which asks us to embrace discomfort (also critical to Glen Singleton's approach in Courageous Conversations about Race) as we work toward liberation with a focus on most impacted in our institutions. Dynamic inquiry and positive tension exist at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional lenses and are necessary to apply conditions to apply the lens of systemic oppression.

At the individual level, it shows up as critical self-reflection in the skin we are in. In our organizations, sustaining the internal work is probably the most challenging and the most likely to be perceived as unnecessary by leadership. Internal equity work is focused inward and recognizes the secondary trauma practitioners often hold. Internal equity work holds spaces for us to make meaning of our own internal biases, formative experiences related to implicit and explicit racism and systems of oppression, and how we plan to show up in affinity and across difference to address the equity challenge through a co-design process. In the Great Expectations Mentoring (GEM) fellowship, I redesigned in my first year at Chicago Public Schools, and every fellow developed their own equity stances. Stance building is an iterative, continuous project to unpack how we show up.

## 1.2. Critical Self-Reflection in Practice

Readiness for co-design must be cultivated through deliberate and structured practice. The following are some of the tools and approaches that support this foundational phase:

- ***Equity Training and Autobiographies:*** Equity-focused professional learning that invites participants to explore their privilege, identity, and experiences is essential. Exercises such as writing and sharing racial or cultural autobiographies allow participants to build a shared language, deepen empathy, and surface implicit assumptions. Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversations protocol offers a framework of agreements and conditions that help teams remain grounded in honesty, vulnerability, and curiosity. This is not one-time work. Ongoing reflection must be embedded into the culture of the team, especially for those in positions of institutional authority.

- ***Assessing Mindsets and Commitment:*** Institutions must evaluate their readiness candidly. Is equity truly non-negotiable, or is it still treated as optional or symbolic? Do team members genuinely believe that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution? Tools such as equity rubrics, reflective protocols, and readiness checklists can help teams identify areas of strength and growth. Institutions at early or nascent stages often lack data transparency, authentic community relationships, or clear accountability. These gaps must be addressed with humility—not defensiveness—before co-design efforts can proceed.

- ***Building a Shared Equity Stance:*** Establishing a collective equity vision is a cornerstone of co-design readiness. Teams must explicitly define what equity means in their context, how it intersects with race, disability, gender, language, and other dimensions of identity, and how they will uphold those values in their process. One powerful strategy is to co-create an equity stance—a written commitment to how each team member intends to "show up" in this work. This practice was central in the Great Expectations Mentoring (GEM) fellowship I redesigned at CPS, where fellows developed and shared personal stances as living, evolving declarations. These stances became a touchstone for accountability, care, and purpose.

Adopting a stance rooted in targeted universalism—where universal goals are coupled with targeted strategies for those furthest from opportunity—can help ensure clarity and direction. But only if the team is prepared to engage in the necessary conversations about why race-neutral approaches fall short and how power must be redistributed in practice, not just in language.

## 1.3. "The Work" Before the Work

Readiness is ultimately a test of organizational courage. Are we willing to hear truths that disrupt our assumptions? Are we prepared to change course based on what the community teaches us? Are we ready to share—not just invite—decision-making power? If the answer is *not yet*, then the institution has more work to do before stepping into a co-design process with integrity. One community member from Greater Englewood underscored this point, arguing that CPS could "promote trust and healing by acknowledging decisions made have been inequitable. "Such an honest reckoning— "to name the inequity that exists and how we fit into it"—was seen as "an educational opportunity in mindset shifting for our entire city." In other words, before asking others to trust or engage, institutions must first own up to their mistakes and be willing to be changed by the truth.

As one guide reminds us, successful co-design teams embody "a culture of trust, courage, and shared ownership, meeting all preconditions for success." That culture is not spontaneous. It is built over time, through investment, through conflict, and a shared commitment to liberation. Co-design is not merely about generating ideas together—it is about transforming how decisions are made, who makes them, and to what end. It is the work of collective liberation: dismantling hierarchical decision-making, redistributing power, and establishing community-rooted governance. But such transformation cannot occur unless those traditionally holding power first commit to being learners and listeners, willing to be changed by the process. Only then can the design be truly co-owned.

By the end of this readiness phase, a co-design team should have:

- a diverse and representative membership,
- a clearly articulated shared equity vision,
- leadership buy-in with tangible support, and
- a set of team norms that foster transparency, honesty, and belonging.

With these conditions in place, the team is equipped to move into the next phase: building the relationships, rhythms, and commitments that will sustain a successful and transformative co-design process.

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

Let's take the case of Greater Englewood, two neighborhoods – Englewood and West Englewood – on the Southside of Chicago, we've been chronicling. The conditions were based on historical and current racism and systems of oppression; co-design, in this case, is a process and outcome necessary to build public trust. That's adaptive work pushing institutions to change, though there are technical, logistical concerns that are implied in a sustainable structure allowing the work to flourish; these are the preconditions.

We know from Chapter 1 that the first precondition is critical self-reflection and liberatory pedagogy. At the interpersonal and institutional levels, it shows up in dynamic inquiry, positive tension, and normalizing scientifically rigorous, peer-reviewed equity audits and community co-design as a process to produce finalized policies. For Englewood residents, the message was clear: *"Policy done to us, without us, perpetuates harm—even when it claims to be equity."* Indeed, the community's feedback to district leadership called for creating a participatory governance structure and holding up a mirror to the district's practices, openly naming past inequities as a step toward healing and trust. These are not "soft" issues; they are structural preconditions for any authentic co-design process.

This chapter focuses on the structural, philosophical, and relational conditions—or preconditions—that must be established before co-design begins. These preconditions include institutional commitment and resources, clarity of purpose, stakeholder inclusion and trust-building, and alignment of internal policies and practices. These elements are not peripheral. They are foundational. And critically, as Chapter 1 made clear, the first and most essential precondition is liberatory thinking, rooted in critical self-reflection, equity stances, and a commitment to co-design as a transformative rather than performative process.

At the interpersonal and institutional levels, these ideas take shape through practices of dynamic inquiry, the embrace of positive tension, and the normalization of scientifically rigorous, peer-reviewed equity audits and community co-design processes that ultimately inform finalized policy decisions. Institutions must be ready to engage in deep learning and adaptive change, but they must also meet the technical and logistical demands that allow that change to be sustainable.

## 2.1. Institutional Commitment and Philosophical Grounding

One of the extensions of the CPS Equity Framework I developed was the Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA). The REIA included a pre-assessment to determine readiness due to the many requirements, but the bottom line was that an initiative could not create greater harm for most impacted groups already experiencing compounded inequities; that's operating from non-negotiables (philosophical deontology) and a rejection or at least major modification of a greatest good approach.

In the fictional film *Minority Report (2002)*, a small group of individuals with a specific asset – telepathy - are imprisoned in a room to ensure society operates optimally, and inequities are addressed. It's because they can see the future and prevent crimes before they happen. Deontology would say this society isn't at all equitable because those 12 people in a room experience pain, suffering, and humiliation for the rest of us. This logic plays out at many levels in a racial capitalist system; laissez-faire economics would state that if such a structure were to arise, the market should fix itself through innovation inspired by competition. However, the ways egregious historical and present-day atrocities and human rights violations persist are by allowing systemic racism, oppression, and harm to play out unfettered. A greatest good (a.k.a. a utilitarian or consequentialist) approach argues that the end justifies the means, so if we end up in a more equitable situation, then however we got there is justified, according to the philosophy school of thought that permeates our institutions in a racial capitalist society.

Racism has to exist in a racial capitalist society to explain and justify the undervaluing of Black, Indigenous, and People of color's lives; we have to socialize dehumanization as a form of U.S. propaganda to reproduce and sustain the Kingian axis of evil: racism, poverty, and militarism. The same dehumanization required to sustain a war against Vietnam is required to justify the funding of Israel against the Palestinian people, and that comes from the same deep roots as underfunding schools on the West and South sides.

Alex Kotlowitz's thesis in the book *There Are No Children Here* about the impact of compounded racism and opportunity difference impacting the South and West sides of Chicago, and concludes Black Chicagoans become adults early due to the impacts we experience and, in the book, cites research comparing the PTSD as surpassing soldiers in Iraq, at the time. This relates to the physiological weathering the body experiences as a site of racist policy. Dumas (2014) elucidates this in "Schools as a Site of Black Suffering"; Black bodies are reflective of racist policies. Black communities on the South and West side are most likely to experience obesity and most likely to experience a food desert; most likely to be shot and least likely to have access to a hospital; more likely to experience property crime, and less likely to have access to police and fire departments; more likely to suffer obesity and diabetes, and less likely to have access to a grocery store in a one mile radius. In each case, you can see that what the community lacks at the level of opportunity, if addressed, would begin to challenge the problem we are solving for.

And it would be clear if you subjected a neighborhood to racist housing or transportation policy, if you underfunded a neighborhood, took our core anchor institutions like schools, community centers, mental health institutions, churches, and even municipal buildings, then the cause should be clear.

The geography of inequity is mapped policy by policy, decision by decision. When a community is subjected to racist housing policies, denied adequate public transit, stripped of anchor institutions (schools, churches, clinics), and then *blamed* for its condition, the real cause is embedded in what the city chose not to protect. Institutional commitment to co-design, therefore, must include an ethical and historical reckoning: a pledge to stop creating harm and calling it "data," and to start repairing harm through power-sharing.

## 2.2. Shared Language and Equity Vision as Preconditions

Part of the work of establishing pre-conditions means we have to have a middle ground where we agree on non-negotiables and shared language. I have supported school districts like Chicago Public Schools and municipalities, including Evanston, Peoria, and DuPage County. I also served on the founding equity committees for both the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) between 2020 and 2023. In each case, leading from an equity framework, establishing an equity lens, and embedding guiding principles, including cultural responsiveness, targeted universalism, and community co-design, is non-negotiable. The challenge with shared language and non-negotiables being a precondition is that they must also be the product of community co-design. In Chicago Public Schools, there is a necessary iterative process, pause, and potential interplay between liberatory thinking and inclusive partnerships, and between the questions:  what is the problem we are solving for? How do we know? Who is at the table? Who is most impacted by the problem we are solving for?

By the nature of how the questions are presented, our answer to one question changes how we respond to others. For example, if we are solving for Black male students' disproportionate disciplinary outcomes, is it really about adult mindsets and opportunity differences, or do we assign blame to the students?

Pre-conditions are mostly organizational and interpersonal. Too often, equity initiatives require those already most impacted to stick their necks out further and take a risk to advance a cause, and that reflects the current and historical struggle toward human and civil rights in the United States. That's why a major precondition is having the right leaders with the right (liberatory) mindsets and the right processes (dynamic inquiry and positive tension) working toward a high functioning learning centered organization.

## 2.3. Stakeholder Inclusion and Trust-Building

Another critical precondition is meaningful stakeholder inclusion from the very start. This goes beyond the internal composition of the project team; it extends to community members, student leaders, family advocates, frontline staff, and partner organizations—especially those voices historically excluded from decision-making. However, we cannot confuse inviting people with engaging them. Inclusion is not a token gesture. In communities like Greater Englewood, we began with listening sessions—not to extract information, but to bear witness. We didn't arrive with a predetermined agenda or a defensive posture. We simply asked, "What have you experienced?" and then we listened, without interruption and denial. This act—what I call a campaign of listening—is itself political. It recenters the narrative and reorients power. In that spirit, the discipline of listening requires embracing discomfort. As I wrote during the Englewood campaign: *"Treat it like a discipline/ Appreciate the dissonance/ And stand in the middle."* That is where transformation lives—in the friction and contradiction we are usually taught to avoid. Real listening shifts power because you don't extract stories, you receive them; you don't seek to confirm your assumptions, you let them be undone.

From there, trust-building becomes concrete. We conduct stakeholder mapping to identify who must be at the table and what it will take for them to show up. Who is most impacted by the issue? Who is regularly excluded from these conversations? Where do these stakeholders naturally gather, and what barriers might prevent them from participating (e.g., lack of childcare, language access, transportation, scheduling conflicts, or digital access)? Proactively addressing these barriers is not an act of charity or "going above and beyond" – it is a non-negotiable precondition for equitable participation. Providing stipends, food, interpretation services, transit passes, and flexible meeting times is baseline practice, not a bonus or favor. Institutions must meet people where they are if they expect to share ownership of the process. Only when community stakeholders see that their presence is genuinely valued (and not just for show) can trust begin to form.

## 2.4. Setting Norms and Aligning Internal Structures

Preconditions also include establishing the norms of collaboration that will guide the work. Early on, the co-design team should co-create working agreements or "ground rules" that model the equity and inclusion we seek. These might include norms like *"assume best intent but name impact," "step up and step back"* (equalizing airtime between staff and community members), or rotating facilitation roles to decentralize power in meetings. Such micro-decisions may seem small, but they begin to reshape institutional muscle memory. By practicing power-sharing internally—through something as simple as who gets to speak or lead—we model the co-governance that the broader process aspires to

build. Norm-setting is thus a precondition for success: it creates a protected space where new power dynamics can take hold.

Finally, an institution must align its policies and infrastructure with the co-design effort. If there are existing bylaws or rules that technically exclude community members from certain committees or decisions, those rules need to be amended upfront. If the budget does not reflect the stated equity values (for example, if no funds are allocated for community participation or capacity-building), then resources must be reallocated to walk the talk. If staff are unprepared to collaborate as equals with community experts, they must be trained or paired with coaches. In one district I worked with, we even halted a punitive policy mid-review to signal our seriousness about change—sometimes a symbolic break from "business as usual" is needed to show a clean departure from a harmful status quo. Too often, institutions launch co-design initiatives without first repairing the structural barriers that will inevitably sabotage them. Use tools such as a Co-Design Readiness Rubric to assess where your institution stands on leadership buy-in, policy alignment, community trust, data transparency, and clarity of purpose. In fact, Chicago Public Schools' own Equity Policy Rubric Workbook for the policy review process explicitly required a listening campaign and an equity audit as part of understanding the context – a recognition that hearing from those least served and reviewing historical impacts are fundamental steps in any equitable policy redesign. In short, co-design fails when institutions seek community buy-in without a willingness to change themselves. Institutional courage and humility must pave the way *before* a community is ever invited in.

## In Summary

Establishing preconditions is not "administrative prep" – it is *equity practice*. It requires courage, clarity, and conviction from all involved. In summary, the key preconditions for co-design success include:

- ***Institutional commitment*** – grounded in both policy supports and ethical stances (leadership must back the process even when it challenges the status quo).
- ***A clear and co-defined equity focus*** – agreement on what inequity is being addressed, why it matters, and explicit naming of the harm (no vague "for all" platitudes).
- ***Meaningful stakeholder inclusion and trust-building*** – engaging those most impacted as partners from the beginning and investing in the relationships and access that make their participation possible.
- ***Shared language and non-negotiables*** – a common equity vision and terminology, developed *with* the community, to guide the work and keep everyone accountable to the same values.

- ***Aligned norms, policies, and infrastructure*** – internal practices and resources configured to support power-sharing (from meeting norms to budget line items), so that the institution is truly ready to co-create.

When these conditions are in place, a co-design team can proceed with credibility, transparency, and confidence. The groundwork has been laid for an authentic partnership. In the next phase, we will turn to formally defining the equity challenge itself—and identifying how the team will explore and understand that challenge together. When these conditions are in place, a co-design team can proceed with credibility, transparency, and confidence. The next chapter will take up the work of formally defining the equity challenge itself and identifying how the team will explore and understand that challenge together.

# CHAPTER 3: DEFINING THE EQUITY CHALLENGE AND CONTEXT

The situating of the equity challenge should happen within the respective community co-design initiative rather than preceding or the initiative risks being defined without community input. The basic formula for defining the equity challenge invokes what Dr. King labeled in A Letter from a Birmingham Jail in 1963, "inside innovators, outside agitators, and overall orchestrators." We know that when there was a global revolution for Black lives in 2020 in the wake of the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery protests, cities began to create equity policies, racial equity funds, and move funds for community policing to more restorative initiatives. In this case, the community organizing created what John Kingdon, in his 1984 book "Agenda, Alternatives, and Public Policy," called a policy window, which is a period when a particular idea is ripe for reform or change. How the policy window is opened needs to be understood in the policy context.

## 3.1. Contextualizing the Issue—Data and Lived Experience

Understanding how and why a policy window opens is part of policy context – the first of three policy phases outlined in the CPS Equity Policy Rubric Workbook I co-developed (the others being process and content). Policy context requires an honest review of historical conditions, legal landscapes, and prevailing narratives. It asks: What gave rise to this issue? What does the public believe about it? What conditions are necessary for meaningful change?

In that sense, defining the equity challenge is not a technical step – it is an act of epistemic justice in the CPS Equity Policy Rubric Workbook, designed for policy owners, which includes three policy phases: context, process, and content. Policy context is where we understand the preconditions related to policy success or failure, learn about the history of why it was created, and what the public response is. In a policy context, we must understand the legal landscape from local to state and federal policy as much as we need to understand public perception; it gets back to a priori vs a posteriori knowledge; co-design as a philosophical tradition rejects a priori knowledge as supreme. It rejects the so-called meritocracy as an outcome of racial capitalism; rather, we are assigned societal positionality and, in the Sartrean tradition, seek to transcend our positionality. It refuses the myth of meritocracy and bootstrap pulling as fuel to racial capitalism. Instead, it situates each of us within our assigned positionalities and asks whether we are willing to transcend them through liberatory praxis.

## 3.2. Articulating the Equity Challenge

The equity challenge we name will determine the solutions we are able to generate. That is why this process must be approached with humility, rigor, and moral clarity. Often, institutions begin with a broad issue (for example, "racial disparities in reading achievement" or "lack of trust between police and community") and must refine it. A strong problem definition is specific, measurable, and explicitly framed in equity terms, identifying the undesirable outcome and the affected group(s). For instance, 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 clear that the current system is inequitable and focuses attention on those most impacted.

When I co-led an overhaul of the Capital Infrastructure budgetary formula through co-design, we began with the understanding from policy context and our equity audit that the South and West sides of Chicago had been historically underfunded and quantified as a baseline of what it would take to correct these historical and current inequities. If we had looked at the problem and only asked how we make sure all schools are "safe, warm, and dry" without the non-negotiable "we will not underfund the South or West side," then the outcome would be as it had been for years:  a greatest needs approach strategy that continued to exacerbate underfunding.

A 2016 UIYC report by Famer and Barber found that student-based budgeting specifically underfunded Black schools the most in Chicago Public Schools over two years. That student-based budgeting policy was similarly utilitarian, as laissez-faire economics justifies the ends through the means, and thus allows racism and systems of oppression to fill the void because SBB just meant that wherever students and families chose to enroll would dictate budgets rather than need. So, white flight, gentrification, segregation, housing discrimination, and other opportunity differences would fill the void. And fill the void these oppressive systems did with Black schools receiving the disproportionate brunt of the racialized attack, especially in the case of neighborhoods on the South and West side, like Englewood and West Englewood. SBB functioned as a mechanism for deepening rather than disrupting opportunity differences.

## 3.3. Organizational Non-Negotiables: A Logical Argument for Equity

It's those simple non-negotiables deriving from our moral compass and our full commitment that change systems. Our non-negotiables are seemingly obvious until you pick your head up from the sand and realize that in 2025, we are at a deeply fascistic and racist time in the United States, from mass deportations to curtailing human and civil rights to closing DEI offices, Islamophobia, transphobia, corporate greed, and environmental degradation. At a certain point, not holding space for deep inquiry focused on good public service, whether through local or national influence, represents

an anti-intellectual fascism, and this represents some of the danger in what our non-negotiables are.

Now, to give a detailed explanation of the non-negotiables of equity, first introduced in the introduction. If we were to construct a short but rigorous argument summarizing the non-negotiables of our work, it would include the following:

1. ***Opportunity differences situate and explain outcome differences:*** Whatever outcome we are looking at—whether related to health, education, travel time, or access to voting information—the historical and current processes situating opportunity differences explain the difference in outcome. For example, if we underfund schools, shouldn't we expect them not to perform as well? If we design the system without reference to those who need the most support in the system, then aren't we advancing a greatest-good support effort?

2. ***Opportunity difference is the product of racism and systems of oppression:*** We live in a society built on the backs of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Muslims, and those living with physical and cognitive differences. In many instances—returning to the people, place, and period guiding principle—as James Baldwin described, they—the most impacted groups— "built the country for free." From the steam engine to the Back of the Yards, to the fish sandwich in Chicago in the early 20th century, to the watermelon seed that formerly enslaved Africans brought from the continent.

3. ***Community epistemology must be embodied (narratives are necessary as a norm):*** When we are leading in culturally responsive and anti-racist ways, we recognize the genius and the assets in the room. We recognize that situatedness and positionality are tied to race, gender identity and expression, income, and zip code. Co-design proceeds from the understanding that those most impacted by the problem should be co-designers of the solution and have a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the problem or equity challenge itself. Wouldn't it make sense, if you were building an ADA-accessible curb in front of your building, that—regardless of how you may have thought to design the accessible area—someone for whom the intervention is intended would have the best understanding of whether it works? That doesn't mean we should test strategies—reminiscent of Henrietta Lacks and the Syphilis experiments—on the most impacted members of our society. This connects back to why, in the CPS Equity Framework, we start with liberatory thinking, and why resource equity is always implicated: because we will have to change the way our organizations are structured for co-design to be truly successful.

4. ***Power must be shared:*** The process of co-design builds public trust while leaders show up with cultural humility, human-centered design, and cultural and

developmental responsiveness. If we recognize that opportunity difference situates achievement difference—that outcomes are predictable based on race and socioeconomic indicators—and that people are experts on their own experience (a posteriori knowledge—experience-based—when qualitatively synthesized, is equal to or greater than a priori knowledge—scientific), then we begin to transform our systems. If we recognize that people fall prey to systems beyond their control, as Heidegger described, and we engage in a social contract, we recognize that—just as race is socially constructed—so too are the implicit agreements or non-negotiables of a racial capitalist system itself. Meaning that, as we slide further and further into fascism and racism, we will increasingly be told: "It's all right. We should appreciate what we have. It's based on merit." In the words of Malcolm X, we "learn to love the master more than the master loves himself" and to "hate the roots of our tree." Stereotype threat is the tip of the iceberg, and the Lovean "spirit murder" is near the top of the pyramid of white supremacy. What happens in society is the opposite of opportunity situating outcome; access and opportunity are determined by the outcomes themselves. And we often—as if dealing with a complicated rather than complex system—focus on a particular outcome and, in a no-holds-barred style, change the system around that particular outcome. In Chicago, that might be represented with a metric like freshman-on-track, or in local government, it might be boosting an environmental standard, even though those most impacted might be people of color or agricultural contractors. In doing so, we might improve that outcome, even while the entire system is serving the most impacted group less well overall. Or even worse, when we close schools down, for example, in the name of improving academic performance or even under-utilization, this becomes a dog whistle for Black exclusion and outward migration dressed up as high expectations. Meaning, when we say these schools were underperforming, we meant that Black communities didn't deserve the anchor institution. Then, when we shift to underutilization, we are accepting that white flight and laissez-faire economics should dictate which schools stay open and which close. What if families didn't want to attend a school because most impacted people were there? That's essentially what white flight is and what is evident in Chicago and all over the country. And finally, after a lot of work with the enrollment office at Chicago Public Schools, at the end of my tenure in 2023, changes were made to the enrollment formula using the CPS Opportunity Index to place a greater importance on opportunity differences by race, gender identity and expression, and zip code in providing accessibility and success. The reason the Opportunity Index works is that it proceeds through liberatory thinking and then inclusive partnerships. We are transparent, engage people, surface solutions, redesign policy based on what we hear, disaggregate results by race and socioeconomic factors or opportunity indicators, go back to the community and share our progress through continuous iteration, and affirm and celebrate our progress—all while building

public trust, focusing on the equity challenge, surfacing dynamic solutions, and increasing belonging.

5. ***Clear, publicly trackable equity metrics must be established:*** We know disinvestment has occurred in the most impacted communities. As institutions, it must be acknowledged—and there is a way to do it—that we have perpetuated historical atrocities, and our boardrooms have been filled with egregious historical figures. That our mindsets and practices were the problem. We begin to measure. At Chicago Public Schools, we did this with the overall budget and capital infrastructure. What percent of the budget was devoted to an equity-based formula? What was our goal for increasing it over time? What would the requirements be for the new Culturally Responsive Education and Diversity initiatives, and on what timeline? How long would schools and departments have to adjust to the requirement to be more culturally responsive and anti-racist? These were questions I was constantly engaging with through empathy interviews, community co-design labs, and reading spreadsheets to synthesize solutions.

6. ***Focus on people, place, and period as dimensions of outcome and process:*** Just as our goals must be SMART goals (Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound), they must also follow the people, place, and period theory: they should focus on real people (current and historical), the places that were impacted as a measurable unit, and the periods in which this occurred. For example, if a city established a reparations policy, it would have to specifically nail all three of those dimensions to be successful: which people, in what place, and in what period would receive reparations?

7. ***Recognize our liberatory consciousness and measure how we show up:*** The perennial debate at the intersection of philosophy, cognitive science, and neuroscience is the relationship between consciousness and science itself. Consciousness is a filter that precedes even the instruments we use and is intertwined with the language we use to represent those instruments. In white-dominant culture, we foreground white consciousness and the related qualia and interpretation of what we experience. Co-design is about recognizing other systems of reality that might be radically different from your own; it means you will question even the most basic assumptions in your approach to foreground and center voices and perspectives that may have been previously ignored or maligned in the struggle for civil and human rights. It means accepting your mistakes and authentically apologizing—not just symbolically or with words, but through action. It's almost another axiom, adjacent to when James Baldwin talks about systems of reality and, as a Black boy, "realizing you were the Indian": the people (especially those most impacted) didn't fail—the system failed us. And that's actually by design. As someone who identifies as both Black and biracial, I

recognize an intersectionality, and that's a lens I bring to all situations. We are all at various intersections, and some are foregrounded predictably—the person with the most melanin experiences the worst treatment or support. This is similar to how, from a genealogical perspective, we are all the product of racial admixture (meaning our racial heritage is mixed), even though only a small sliver of the United States population would identify as mixed race (2.9% in 2010, though growing over time). This relates to both how race was framed from a white-dominant perspective in the United States (five checkboxes only), versus how the many gradations of race show up elsewhere in the world, such as the 120 racial groups in Brazil.

8. ***Rewire social construction, community co-design, and cultural humility:*** Society is socially constructed, from the way our Constitution works to how we define racial and ethnic categories. Historically, power is vested in how social construction works. If we rewire our institutions to put equitable outcomes at the center, with a focus on those furthest from opportunity, then we are engaging in a transformation that must be seen from local municipalities to state and federal practices.

These are not aspirational—they are foundational. Without them, the co-design process risks becoming symbolic. With them, it becomes transformative.

## 3.3. The Greater Englewood Example

Let's take the Greater Englewood listening campaign as an example. The community prioritized a non-negotiable of "stopping racialized attacks," community-driven decision making, hyper-resourcing the two neighborhoods, and culturally responsive programs and leadership. These priorities, identified by elected officials, community organization leadership, school leadership, students, and activist groups, exemplify an understanding of the need for opportunity differences to be guided by a comprehensive understanding of historical and present inequities.

We have to recognize and acknowledge racism and systems of oppression in process and outcomes: it means we are culturally responsive facilitators setting the right conditions, and it also means our policies are driven by a root cause analysis revealing the systemic roots of the equity challenge. It means we advance solutions to address root causes, but we do so in a way that includes non-negotiable tenets by people, place, and period, so most impacted groups don't continue to experience compounded disadvantage linked to physiological weathering, in part accounting for life expectancy differences. That's why at Chicago Public Schools, a measure of life expectancy was built into both our Equity and Opportunity Index. So, the history of racism, segregation, economic disinvestment, disenfranchisement, and exploitation in Chicago must be understood geographically and

urban planning initiatives must aim to ameliorate the impact of de jure racism, including Home Owner' Loan Association (HOLC) redlining established in 1921 in Illinois, and de facto racism, including many of the practice of housing discrimination not ever codified including informally denying someone based on the color of their skin.

## 3.4. The Bridge Between Defining the Problem and Equity Audits and Community Listening

Now, let me speak to the interplay between identifying the equity challenge and the next chapter, conducting equity audits, and community listening. These two chapters are where a lot of continuous iteration must occur, and sometimes initiatives become stuck. That's because the equity challenge we are solving for may change based on what we are learning in the equity audit and community listening spaces. For example, when I supported the redesign of the Student Code of Conduct at CPS, we reviewed the policy annually, and the policy process I oversaw required policy owners to develop a Comprehensive Policy Redesign Plan that required measuring policy impact and continuous iteration. The Student Code of Conduct was an important example of this because there was a lot of "outside agitation" that required "inside innovation" and "overall orchestration." In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the global Movement for Black Lives, CPS was pushed to reconcile the policy that exacerbates inequitable outcomes, especially for Black students. We also worked on the Student Code of Conduct to ensure that we think about the ways the policy was anti-racist, like considering the ways racial identity related to certain incidents – i.e., treating a Black student using a racialized term "of endearment" as a hate crime or a highly offensive one leading to suspension or loss of class time. By reviewing a policy at a regular timeline, you set into motion a review of the policy impact, collecting evidence, updates to ensure continuous improvement, and professional learning involved.

## 3.5. Documenting the Baseline

By the end of this phase, the team should produce an Equity Challenge Brief. This brief functions as a living compass, orienting all future work. It should include:

- A clearly defined equity challenge statement – a concise description of the inequity being addressed, framed in equity terms.
- Disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data – evidence (both numbers and narratives) that illustrates the depth and dimensions of the inequity.
- Synthesized community input – key themes, quotes, and testimonies from those most affected.
- Identified or hypothesized root causes – an analysis of why the inequity exists, based on data and community perspective.

- The non-negotiables that will anchor solution design – core equity principles or requirements that any future solution must uphold.

This document is not a summary – it is an agreement. If community members do not see their experiences reflected in this framing, trust will erode. Without trust, co-design cannot succeed.

## 3.6. Practice-Based Preconditions

Defining the equity challenge may appear to be the first formal step in a community co-design initiative. In truth, it is the third movement in a larger sequence. The first was critical self-reflection (Chapter 1); the second was establishing preconditions (Chapter 2). Those phases ensure the cultural responsiveness, internal learning, and trust-building required for authentic equity analysis.

The institutions need to sustain a racial equity impact assessment, targeted universalist goal setting, and community co-design, which align with the intersection we prioritize at an organization I work for, C3E:  equity, effectiveness, and efficiency. The equity challenge radiates from the individual through the interpersonal and institutional, and vice versa. If we are truly being efficient and effective, we should be equitable; that implies a deontology and non-negotiable commitment to equity at the center. We have to remember that the equity challenge we are solving for changes the solutions we surface. At CPS, every equity-driven initiative began with capacity-building for policy owners, cross-office coordination, budgetary alignment, and public transparency. Organizations that skip these steps fall into what has been described as a "ready, fire, aim." They mistake urgency for action and overlook reflection. We must instead choose ready, aim, fire, rooted in equity, pauses, culturally responsive feedback loops, and institutional accountability.

## In Summary: From Challenge to Iteration

Part of the work of critical self-reflection (phase 1) and establishing preconditions (phase 2) is to make sure these non-negotiables of community co-design are in place. As someone who oversaw the transformation of more than half of the Board Policies in the now fourth, at the time, third largest school district in the country for a 5-year period, I can say with certainty that the mechanics for the co-design engine to move are exemplified in this approach. In education, we say we must hold a stance to hold space. Cultural competency is really just good service – back to equity, effectiveness, and efficiency intersection – and if organizations do not exhibit it, then they are utilitarian because the ends – profit by any means necessary over people – justify the means.

Defining the equity challenge may be the first formal step in the process, but the true first step occurs in professional learning experiences for staff to build the culturally responsive practices necessary to lead and sustain the work. In CPS, we always began with professional learning for policy owners, offices, and departments, and schools in conjunction with the targeted universalist goal setting, capstone projects, budgetary and policy revision and creation, continuous improvement, and evaluation processes when implementing the Equity Framework. The work must be steeped in a high-functioning organizational learning culture, and then we proceed with a rigorous community-driven analysis and continuous improvement process that asks us to suspend judgment, engage in an equity pause, avoid amygdala hijack, and engage in a ready, aim, fire approach rather than the ready, fire, aim.

Defining the equity challenge is not the end of the diagnostic phase. It is the beginning of a dynamic, iterative process that will continue into Chapter 4: Conducting Equity Audits and Community Listening. These two chapters are in constant dialogue. The equity challenge may shift as audits surface new insights and the community voice reveals more precise needs. That is not failure—it is fidelity. When we are truly doing co-design, we are not seeking control. We are seeking understanding. Let us proceed with humility, courage, and an unwavering commitment to those most impacted.

# CHAPTER 4: CONDUCTING EQUITY AUDITS AND COMMUNITY LISTENING

Defining the equity challenge sets the course, but it is not enough. To deepen our understanding, we must examine the institutional landscape and hear directly from those most impacted. Chapter 4 outlines two essential, intertwined components of the community co-design process: equity audits and community listening. These are not technical appendices to the work—they are core commitments to transparency, accountability, and truth-telling.

Equity audits occur when an organization peels back the layers and documents an assessment of policy and practice through an equity lens. Community listening, in parallel, asks institutions to center lived experience, to create space where narrative knowledge is respected as data, and to elevate the wisdom of those too often sidelined. Together, these activities move the work from theory to praxis, from assumption to evidence, from intention to transformation.

## 4.1. Equity Audits: Uncovering Systemic Inequities

An equity audit is a comprehensive examination of an institution's ecosystem—its policies, practices, budgets, staffing, and service delivery—through an equity lens. I remember when I began my role as Equity Policy Strategist in 2019 at Chicago Public Schools, and doing research on all the equity audits related to education and the organizations, school districts, and municipalities that created them. Many urban epicenters, such as Seattle, Oakland, Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Boston, have equity audit tools publicly available, often linked directly to their respective equity offices. Similarly, school districts like Palm Beach, Georgia, Denver, Chicago, Seattle, Oakland, Boston, and Madison have publicly available equity audits from REIAs to equity goal-setting protocols and culturally responsive evaluation rubrics. Many of these tools are publicly available and align with the core principle that historical and current inequities must be documented, not assumed.

At Chicago Public Schools, I co-developed an Equity Report that analyzed district policy, practice, budgets, and continuous improvement initiatives and identified priorities and recommendations, ultimately assigning department and office owners, timelines, and funds. These audits were guided by the CPS Equity Policy Rubric Workbook, launched in 2019 and later revised to version 5. The rubric is organized into three phases: context, process, and content. Each phase includes checkpoints for reflection, stakeholder input, and equity assessment.

Importantly, policy owners were required to engage with our office at four points:

1. At the outset, for professional learning and identifying the equity challenge;
2. Midway through, to conduct an equity audit and lead a listening campaign;
3. Before finalization, for cross-departmental review (Law, Chief Ed Office, CEO's Office, and others); and
4. During and after the public comment window, for transparency and adjustments based on feedback.

I remember many policy review processes where policies were delayed or extended because the policy owner recognized the importance of operating from non-negotiables. Our team recognized that to meet the moment, the process had to slow down—to create space for community response. This is what convergence looks like: when institutional timelines yield to justice timelines. Audits must move beyond compliance. A well-structured equity audit identifies root causes, surfaces patterns, and points to structural leverage points for change. It is a mirror, a map, and a mandate.

## 4.2. Community Listening: Centering Lived Experience

While equity audits provide institutional insight, community listening provides human truth. As I've written elsewhere, co-design must live by another motto: Nothing about us without us. That requires structured, sustained, and sincere engagement with those most impacted by the equity challenge.

This is not focus group facilitation. It is empathy-based inquiry, designed to surface the emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions of systemic harm. In my work at LRFB Equity Consulting, we use empathy interviews—semi-structured conversations rooted in motivational interviewing, appreciative inquiry, and storytelling. This methodology has proven effective in both school and municipal contexts. This process includes a clear interview protocol, a structured method for analyzing themes, and recommended alignment with applicable policies, and it reflects what I have done in various contexts and first developed through my work in Greater Englewood. For example, in one district's diverse learner program redesign, empathy interviews revealed a pattern: parents of Black students felt excluded from the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process and distrusted school personnel; students reported internalizing shame and stigma due to labeling. These were not isolated comments—they were thematic, repeated across sites and interviews. They informed new policies on inclusion, family engagement, and identity-affirming supports.

Listening is not extraction. It is a relational act of trust-building and accountability. In the Greater Englewood Listening Campaign, which I led as Principal Investigator, we heard directly from residents, school leaders, students, and organizers. They named what had been taken: schools, clinics, parks, places of worship. They named what they wanted:

culturally responsive leadership, community-controlled budgets, hyper-resourcing. The findings were published, presented to the Board of Education, and used to shape CPS's policy stance.

When I was the Manager of Organizational Performance and Equity at the City of Evanston, I established a listening campaign with the approval of the City Manager, and with the same methodology as the Greater Englewood listening campaign, interviewed 41 Evanston stakeholders, including elected officials and selected executive officials and senior staff. The listening campaign took 4 months and identified ways the organization internally believed it needed to work to continuously improve in advancing equity across the 11 Departments.

## 4.3. Institutionalizing Equity-Based Inquiry

In my time at CPS, we formally revised 85 policies, and there were many other Board Rules, unpassed policies, practices, continuous improvement initiatives, and grant opportunities that we applied the Equity Policy Rubric Workbook to. The workbook launched in June 2019, and at the time, we were reviewing several financial policies as well as the Arts Collection and the Student Code of Conduct. We got to version 5 of the rubric, and by this time, there were three policy sections:  context, process, and content.

Formal listening and audit work must be supported through organizational structures. When I led this work at CPS, we embedded it into every major equity initiative—beginning with professional learning, followed by goal setting, budgetary realignment, policy revision, and evaluation frameworks. Our signature initiative, the Great Expectations Mentoring (GEM) fellowship, modeled these principles: it integrated culturally responsive coaching, community co-design, and continuous improvement through the dual lenses of targeted universalism and dynamic inquiry.

Equity work must be institutionalized, not episodic. If we only use empathy interviews when convenient or run audits as one-time assessments, we reinforce the same utilitarian logic that equity seeks to undo. Equity must be baked into the organizational strategy, not applied as icing once a plan is already in motion. That's why I continue to argue for policy formalization. For instance, in Illinois, the Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards offer legal grounding. At the federal level, by contrast, we are seeing intensified pushback—anti-CRT legislation, anti-DEI mandates, and regressive public policy. This divergence demands that cities and districts codify equity in policy wherever possible, providing cover, structure, and consistency for the work.

My research into the 100 largest school districts in the country showed that districts serving a majority of students of color were more likely to have equity policies, while most districts defaulted to nondiscrimination or harassment policies. The political

polarization of our time means this pattern will likely intensify, strong equity efforts will expand in some jurisdictions, and be outlawed in others.

My analysis of the 100 largest school districts in the United States as of July 2025 found that 87% had a public nondiscrimination policy—largely reflecting compliance with federal civil rights law—but only 41% had a formal, board-adopted equity policy, and just 26% had implemented a comprehensive equity framework. Less than a third (30%) had a dedicated equity office with staff, budget, and community-facing responsibilities. The presence of equity policies was not evenly distributed. Districts where most students are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous were nearly twice as likely to have adopted an equity policy compared to districts with a majority white student population. These districts were also more likely to center racial equity explicitly and to engage families and students in co-designing solutions.

This pattern reflects a larger political truth: in an era of growing polarization, school districts are diverging sharply. Some are codifying systemic equity work in policy, budgeting, and instructional design—often in response to student and community organizing. Others, particularly in states where equity is politically weaponized, are repealing DEI offices, scrubbing equity language from curricula, or outlawing race-conscious policy altogether. The result is a fractured national landscape where a student's opportunity to learn in a racially equitable environment increasingly depends on their ZIP code.

## 4.4. Understanding Law and Policy through the Equity Audit

Institutionally, you will need to consult with the Law Department closely when it comes to equity-based policy, and that's because of challenges at the federal level as well as a need to deeply understand policies impacting your municipality or school district at the state and local level. For example, in Illinois, there is a Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards with broad application, and the state promotes cultural responsiveness through various policies, while it is only one of 3 states to formalize cultural responsiveness in policy as it applies to education.

More states, such as Florida and Texas, have created strict anti-DEI and anti-CRT policies for educational and governmental institutions, as well as anti-riot legislation in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter global revolution. Furthermore, a state provides cover to school districts, and a school district can provide further cover to its respective educators through policies outlining culturally responsive, anti-racist, and equity-based policies. Based on a district equity audit I led during my time at CPS to understand respective school district equity policies at the time, based on the 100 largest school districts by size, large people of Color school districts were much more likely to have a robust equity policy, while the vast majority of school districts held a non-discrimination,

sexual harassment, and assault policy. Many of the same cities pioneering equity at the municipal level also did so through their respective school districts, such as Portland, Oakland, Seattle, New York, and Chicago.

## 4.5. From Listening to Design

Equity audits and community listening are not the end of the diagnostic phase—they are the bridge to co-design. They tell us what's broken, how it broke, and where we might begin to repair it. When done well, they cultivate humility, build trust, and create a shared sense of direction. Too often, institutions move to solutions prematurely, carrying assumptions rather than evidence. Chapter 4 insists on a different posture—one of deep listening, transparent analysis, and public learning.

In conclusion, this chapter reminds us that the co-design process must be both data-driven and soul-centered. Equity lives in the numbers and in the stories. One without the other is insufficient. As we move to Chapter 5—ideating and co-designing solutions—we do so grounded in truth, with the community's voice leading the way.

# 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.

## 5.1. Starting from Vision

In the Greater Englewood listening campaign, the format was simple, and the questions were few yet deep. There were two anchor questions and 3 to 4 secondary questions. Each interview lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. In each but two of the 34 interviews, I utilized a recorder to later support transcription. At a time when there was no budget-friendly transcription software, I transcribed each word of each interview before proceeding with qualitative synthesis. Anchor questions related to the equity challenge and context—and the equity-based, targeted-universalist solution—can be succinctly summed up, as one racial equity practitioner (and friend) phrased them:

> *"What do you see?"*
> *"What do you want to see?"*

These two simple questions helped surface the root causes of inequity while also pointing toward possibility. They honor both the pain and the hope held by those most impacted. A colleague once noted that these questions are the clearest distillation of targeted universalism—grounding a vision in specific inequities while looking forward collectively.

There is also the Back to the Future protocol. The purpose is to see, touch, feel, taste, and smell the future we are envisioning. If we are truly grounding our equity challenges in root causes, then our policy redesign sessions should always 'dream big,' remembering we have the responsibility to revisit policies and systems with an equity lens so as not to perpetuate and reproduce racial and social inequities. It anchors the design process in possibility, not merely what is probable or permissible within the current system, but what is required to fulfill a just and equitable vision. If we are truly grounding our equity challenges in root causes, then our policy redesign sessions must allow expansive

dreaming, remembering we have a responsibility to revisit policies and systems with an equity lens so as not to perpetuate racial and social inequities.

Contextually, the institution needs to be in a place where it is encouraged for participants to answer these questions – what we see and want to see - and participate in the co-design plan, and this needs to be addressed in the very beginning when establishing pre-conditions, catalyzing professional learning, and situated through leadership planning. To excel in this phase, the comprehensive community engagement plan should be transparently outlined from the beginning of the process. Co-design is a structured way to engage in an equity pause because we are also identifying the equity challenge itself with the respective community impacted by the challenge being solved for.

## 5.2. Structuring Community Participation

Co-design is a structured way to engage in an equity pause because we are also identifying the equity challenge itself with the respective community impacted by the challenge being solved for. We are not only seeking solutions; we are also collaboratively identifying and framing the equity challenge itself alongside the community.

In the case of Chicago Public Schools, typically the policy owner came forward with a specific policy – say the School Nutrition Policy – and then the anchor questions for community co-design may relate to equity-based solutions based on the root causes of inequity, situating the challenge. Because we are talking about systemic challenges of inequity, some of what is unearthed by the equity audit may not be in the locus of control of the policy owner or institutional leader, though there may be an opportunity to work cross-departmentally and inter-institutionally to address the challenge. Unfortunately, there is a push to not acknowledge systemic inequities formally, or worse, to cover them up as EOCO offices sometimes do, which is prominently shown to have taken place in higher education as it applies to sexual assault on college campuses.

Co-design should counteract, not contribute to, such tendencies. It is not a strategy to avoid accountability; it's a method to deepen it. By laying out a clear and open community participation structure from the beginning, institutions signal that they are ready to confront uncomfortable truths and share power in addressing them.

## 5.3. From Greater Englewood to System Redesign

In Greater Englewood, the listening campaign was a way to "connect the system to itself," as Margaret Wheatley advocates, to inspire what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called inside innovation. This Kingian approach to systems change is grounded in moral clarity and radical inclusivity, ensuring the voices of those most impacted by inequitable policies

are prioritized in redesigning both the local and broader systems. Englewood and West Englewood—more than any other community area—saw ten schools closed in five years. This was an anti-Black policy experiment that had never happened before, nor has it been replicated since (In 2013 alone, 49 schools were closed citywide, including five in the Austin neighborhood on Chicago's West Side, and other communities like East Garfield Park, West Garfield Park, Roseland, and South Chicago also experienced closures). These closures compounded decades of disinvestment in schools, housing, and health services in the neighborhood. Our listening sessions made it clear that community-defined equity solutions would require a comprehensive understanding of people, place, and period — in other words, who is affected, where, and with what historical context. The $P^3$ model—People, Place, and Period—is exemplified by the Opportunity Index, illustrating how budgeting can be reoriented to address racial equity effectively:

- ***People:*** Focusing on the experiences and voices of those most affected by disparities ensures that budgetary decisions are inclusive and representative of diverse community needs.
- ***Place:*** Targeting resources towards geographic areas with a history of disinvestment addresses the root causes of inequity, fostering recovery and growth.
- ***Period:*** Incorporating a reparative approach, the model considers both the historical context of current inequities and the ongoing needs of communities, ensuring that allocations are responsive and reparative.

As we moved from listening to action, we looked at the hard data behind these experiences. At CPS, we began measuring not only per-pupil school budgets, but also capital infrastructure investments, philanthropic "Friends of" donations, and even Tax Increment Financing (TIF) allocations. The disparities were staggering. Our analysis confirmed what Englewood residents had long known: the South and West Sides of Chicago were systematically underfunded; the pattern of school closings (and the School Quality Rating Policy, or SQRP) was racially biased; and certain policies (for example, stationing police officers in schools) were linked to increased trauma and violence rather than safety. Policy context matters—understanding these inequities in concrete terms helped us design better solutions.

For racism to continue to take hold, dehumanization must persist; otherwise, it would be impossible to justify ongoing inequity. Liberatory thinking, therefore, requires helping people see the system's design for what it is. We must present the evidence in a way that resonates. Glenn Singleton, in the Courageous Conversations framework (in which I had the opportunity to train), notes that white dominant culture often situates itself in the "intellectual" quadrant of the compass. In practice, this means data and rigorous research can be powerful tools—presented in that intellectual frame—to disrupt myths that inequities are due to failures of the community. We showed, through tools like the

Opportunity Index, that what some call "achievement gaps" are really opportunity differences baked into the system. By demonstrating how outcomes were directly driven by unequal access and resources, we aimed to replace deficit thinking with a clearer understanding: disparities in achievement are created by disparities in opportunity. This shared understanding set the stage for truly transformative co-design work.

## 5.4. Principles of Authentic Co-Design

To set the stage for co-design, the team should affirm a few key principles that will guide all sessions and activities:

- ***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-facilitating design meetings, or that ideas generated by community stakeholders are given equal weight to those from officials, and not overridden or diluted. Institutions must be willing to relinquish control and actively incorporate community leadership. A concrete mechanism to enact this is to create a shared governance structure for the design phase. For example, form a design committee or task force in which community representatives have 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 members and staff (say, to the school board or city council), indicating joint ownership of the outcome.

- ***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 (e.g., data from the audit, notes from listening sessions), and there are no hidden agendas. If certain constraints exist (budget limits, legal barriers), facilitators should be upfront about them so the group can creatively work within or around those limits. 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 and belonging for the affected group, and (c) be feasible within certain resource constraints. These co-created criteria set a common yardstick for evaluating ideas and ensure everyone knows the goals and limits from the start.

- ***Equity and Inclusion in the Process:*** The co-design process itself should model equity and inclusion. Be intentional about inclusion in every activity.

Meetings should be accessible in location, timing, language, and format to all participants. If certain voices are quieter, facilitators find ways to lift them (for instance, using round-robin sharing or anonymous idea submissions to make sure everyone is heard). If technical jargon arises, it's either explained or avoided. Culturally responsive facilitation techniques – such as opening meetings with a check-in or grounding exercise that resonates with the community – can make the space more welcoming. Remember, for many community members, this may be their first time being treated as an equal partner in governance; it's important to continually signal respect and appreciation for their contributions. This might involve, for example, alternating meeting venues between official offices and community spaces, or rotating who leads different parts of the agenda (perhaps a student leads the brainstorming on improving school climate in one session).

- ***Focus on Root Causes and Systems Change:*** To avoid co-design devolving into superficial tweaks, the team should keep conversations anchored on root causes (as identified in prior phases) and aim for systemic solutions. Co-designed solutions should not just treat symptoms of the problem. For instance, if the issue is a lack of representation of minority students in advanced classes, a token solution might be "create a tutoring program" (addressing a symptom — lower preparation), whereas a systemic, co-designed solution could be "revamp the criteria for advanced class entry and ensure honors courses are available in all neighborhood schools." The latter 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. Quick wins and programmatic ideas are welcome, but facilitators should 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?" Steering the group toward systemic answers helps ensure the solution isn't just a Band-Aid but a real step toward equity.

## 5.5. Co-Design Session Strategies

Co-design sessions can take many forms, but they often borrow from design thinking and participatory planning methodologies. Typically, multiple collaborative workshops are held, moving from brainstorming to prototyping, to refinement. Below are some common strategies for these sessions, 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 framing "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 potential solutions to earlier identified root issues (like voice in governance or community investment). Small-group breakouts can help diversify idea generation, with each group tackling a different angle of the problem. It's crucial during brainstorming that community members feel safe proposing bold ideas – even ones that fundamentally challenge the institution. If, say, a student suggests, "What if students had a vote on the school board?", that idea should be noted and explored, not immediately shot down for being unconventional. Often, quantity leads to quality: by putting many ideas on the table, the group can later combine or refine them into stronger concepts.

- ***Empathy-Driven Design:*** Participants are encouraged to design with specific personas or end-users in mind, especially representing those most impacted. For example, in a school discipline policy co-design, one persona might be "a 9th-grade Black male student who has been suspended before." The group asks itself, "Would this solution work for this student? How would it change his experience?" Designing for users furthest from opportunity tends to yield more inclusive solutions for all. This concept aligns with targeted universalism: if you design for those furthest from opportunity, the solutions will often benefit everyone. Co-designers might even create journey maps for these personas – mapping a day in their life or their journey through a system – to pinpoint moments where interventions are needed. By keeping these perspectives at the center, the solutions are more likely to be equity-focused and grounded in reality. (Facilitators can reuse empathy tools from the listening phase here, like empathy interviews: for instance, sharing an anonymized but illustrative quote from an empathy interview and asking, "Does our idea speak to this person's concern? If not, how could we adjust it?")

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

even a role-play exercise demonstrating a new parent-teacher conference format. The idea is to make the solution tangible enough that people can respond to it and provide feedback. Community participants might sketch a new welcoming layout for a public aid office waiting room or draw a flowchart of a reimagined counseling referral process at school that includes peer advocates. Prototyping encourages iterative improvement: the group shares the prototype, discusses what they like about it, and surfaces concerns, then refines the idea. It is essential to iterate with the community, not internally behind closed doors. For example, if one proposed 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 collectively workshop it—perhaps role-playing a disciplinary scenario with the draft protocol—to identify pitfalls or areas for improvement before anything is finalized.

- ***Feedback Loops:*** Co-design should incorporate continuous feedback. Within sessions, this can be built in: after a brainstorming activity, participants might do a gallery walk, leaving sticky-note comments on each idea; after prototyping, the group might do a round of "likes, concerns, and suggestions" for each draft solution. Additionally, the co-design team can seek feedback from a wider circle outside the core group. For instance, after a couple of workshops, they could present the top ideas back to the broader community—via a survey, a virtual forum, or a town hall meeting—to gauge support and gather fresh input. In Englewood's case, the group might host a community meeting at a local church to share emerging ideas (e.g., a proposal for an elected local school council with real power, or a neighborhood school investment plan) and let residents react. This broader feedback ensures the co-designed solutions have wider buy-in and that no major perspective is overlooked. It also continues the transparent ethos: the community sees that progress is being made and feels a part of it at every stage, rather than being presented with a finished plan at the end.

- ***Expert and Evidence Check:*** While community wisdom remains front and center, it can be valuable to loop in subject-matter experts or research evidence at certain points to support or stress-test ideas. For instance, if the group is designing a new reading curriculum approach for English learners, an educator or researcher with expertise in bilingual education might be invited to weigh in on the idea's feasibility or to share what has worked elsewhere. This must be handled carefully—experts should not dominate or dismiss community ideas, but rather enrich the discussion with additional knowledge. Their role is to provide information that the group can then

incorporate or adapt. Similarly, the team should consider evidence from elsewhere: do any pilot programs or case studies exist for similar ideas? What does the data say? Checking ideas against external evidence 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 (such as Oakland Unified School District's well-known program) can provide insight into what resources are needed, what challenges might arise, and what outcomes might be expected.

Throughout the co-design sessions, facilitators must also manage group dynamics and keep the work moving toward actionable outputs. Tensions can arise — for example, a community member might feel an official isn't truly listening, or an official might worry that a suggestion is unrealistic. It's critical to uphold the agreed-upon norms and remind everyone of the shared purpose (and any process agreements established back in Chapter 2). If power imbalances show up (say, officials begin talking over others), facilitators should address them in the moment — perhaps by explicitly giving the floor to community voices first in each discussion segment, or by implementing a structured turn-taking method. The process will not always be smooth, but working through these challenges is part of the relationship-building. It is, in a way, a democracy in microcosm – messy but ultimately rewarding.

## 5.5. Case Example: Greater 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: (1) a lack of community say in school governance, and (2) a 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-making power, and creating a wraparound support program for displaced students that includes mentoring, mental health services, and community-led afterschool activities.

In developing these ideas, community members would share what governance structures they trust – perhaps drawing on examples of elected school boards in other cities – and co-design how council members should be chosen and held accountable. For the support program, students might describe what support they wish had been available to them during school closures, and local community organizations could volunteer to lead different parts of the initiative. The result of this process would be a plan far more attuned to Englewood's needs than any top-down policy mandate could ever be. It would differ markedly from a central-office directive because it originates from community-defined priorities and lived expertise. 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.

## 5.6. Refining and Finalizing Proposals

By the end of the 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 for which parts, and why it will advance equity (tying back to the challenge and root causes identified). It's also wise to include some measures of expected outcomes, so that when the team moves into evaluation, they know what success would look like.

Refinement involves checking the proposals against the criteria set earlier and against the community's inputs. The group might run a final rubric or scorecard exercise, scoring each proposal on the agreed-upon criteria (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 of them at once, so prioritization may be needed. The co-design team should make those decisions collaboratively, perhaps deciding on a phased approach (for example, implement two proposals now and plan to launch a third next year). Ensuring that community members agree with the final decisions is paramount. A quick thumbs-up/down poll or a consensus check at the end of the process can verify that everyone is on board. It would undermine the process if, in the end, officials simply cherry-picked only the ideas they liked. Instead, if there are concerns about any proposal, those should be discussed openly and either adjusted to address the concerns or tabled by mutual agreement. The product of co-design is not just a set of ideas; it's a stronger relationship between the community and the institution, and that relationship 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 institutional leadership in a public way. This moment serves as both a validation and a handoff – it demonstrates transparency and gives credit to all who were involved (for example, "This plan was co-created by a team of Englewood parents, students, and district staff."). As Chapter 6 will cover, implementation will require sustained collaboration and careful stewardship of these ideas. 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 or disempowered, that experience is profoundly empowering in and of itself.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated 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 community members 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: IMPLEMENTING AND SUSTAINING PRACTICE

Designing solutions is a significant milestone, but the journey does not end with a plan on paper. This chapter addresses the critical phase of implementation—turning co-designed ideas into institutional reality—and how to sustain equity practices over time. Too often, promising plans stall during execution, fading into siloed memories or shelved initiatives. To avoid this, the same collaborative, equity-centered approach used in design must guide implementation and long-term strategy.

Implementation must center on inquiry, not merely compliance. It requires grappling with discomfort, confronting complexity, and committing to accountability. In a true community co-design process, policy owners, community organizers, district and municipal leaders, and students and families must remain engaged through every phase of execution—and see their perspectives reflected in the redesigned system itself.

## 6.1. Collaborative Implementation Teams

One immediate step is to establish—or evolve—the co-design team into an implementation team. This step is a specific reference to the Equity Policy Rubric Workbook implemented at Chicago Public Schools. In the process of policy redesign, sustaining praxis is threaded in the beginning:  the comprehensive policy redesign plan. The plan indicates essentially a long-term, iterative PDSA-inspired cycle where the policy changes are made, the policy is implemented, the impact is measured, the community is collaborated with, and a new version of the policy is put forward again. That's really what it means; the Cynefin framework perfectly encapsulates the idea. Typically, when we situate challenges, we assume a complicated or even a simple system rather than a complex system. In a complex system, the relationship between inputs and outputs is not linear, and variables are difficult to account for. When engaging in the community co-design for equity process, we assume a complex system, and that's reflective of our root cause analysis identifying systemic inequities and their corollaries.

I remember when I supported the redesign of the Arts Acquisition Policy with the Arts Department at the Central Office at CPS. In essence, the policy owner had the aspiration to boost participatory democracy and racial equity in the governance process for arts collections in Chicago Public Schools. The policy owner was asking questions like: Is there artwork in CPS that doesn't meet standards of cultural responsiveness, from paintings to sculptures, to statues? Second, who has access to the artwork that does meet these standards by people, place, and period? And finally, how will the voices of those

most impacted be amplified in the arts acquisition process? The outcome of a one-year redesign of the policy was the establishment of a committee to oversee the arts acquisition process from an equity standpoint, driven by student and community voices.

Implementation teams should be distributed and role-specific. One subgroup may handle staff training, another community engagement, and another documentation and monitoring. Each group should include members who bring lived experience alongside institutional expertise. This pairing—staff and community—ensures shared power and collective accountability.

## 6.2. Action Planning

Implementation cannot be left to intuition or goodwill. A detailed plan should outline next steps across a 30-60-90-day timeline, designate clear responsibility for each element, and include co-leads from institutional and community sides. For example, I worked with the Law Department on the Records Retention Policy. After asking questions about who is most impacted by the policy and what some equity challenges present, the law department sent a system-wide survey to all principals, counselors, and other select staff. That was used, as well as the Opportunity Index, to ensure a focus on those furthest from opportunity in both outcome and process. While record retention could seem very mundane and innocuous, it's these blind spots in our institutional bureaucracies that contribute to systemic racism. For example, the policy owner and I discussed the following:  what happens to a student's or alumnus's records and transcripts once a school is closed? When you reframe the question, then we need to answer it by people, place, and period?

Well, let's take Greater Englewood, for example. What happened to the records of the 10 schools that were closed in 5 years? It was this kind of dynamic inquiry, positive tension, and embracing of institutional discomfort supporting policy transformation with a focus on those furthest from opportunity, necessary in a rigorous co-design process. At root, sustaining practice is about sustaining inquiry in process. It's about creating accountability structures that ensure the institution remains agile and responsive to equity challenges as they evolve, and we continue to measure the impact of policy and practice to course correct.

## 6.3. Ensuring Accountability

Let's take the School Quality Rating Policy that was abolished in 2022 and publicly decried as racist – the origins of the policy were "good intentions," and a commitment to assumed non-negotiables of neo-liberal policies. The idea was that Black people didn't try hard enough and that's why "these students" and "these communities" failed." It had to

be justified, to allow underfunding and mistreatment; police monitoring and second-rate facilities; metal turn-styles and trackable uniforms. We have to do this "for them." And this is the sort of logic that eventually leads to the "downward churn" of Black neighborhood schools on the South and West side born out of enrollment policies that historically accelerated Black outward migration in Chicago. That's because schools are anchor institutions in communities, and so are fire departments, police stations, grocery stores, hospitals, and community centers. When these anchor institutions are not developed with a focus on areas furthest from opportunity and experiencing compounded disadvantage, then the same areas of the city are most likely to be impacted by all of these access issues simultaneously. And these are the same areas on the South and West side correlated with the highest rates of health disparities – heart attacks, strokes, chronic conditions – are also the places with the least access to critical resources? How could it be that the neighborhood where you are most likely to get shot is also the neighborhood where the ambulance will take the longest to arrive? The system was designed this way.

Sustaining equity practice begins in the design phase, but accountability is maintained through feedback loops, ownership structures, and transparency. The CPS Equity Policy Rubric Workbook built this directly into the policy redesign lifecycle, drawing from Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles and Cynefin's complexity framework. In systems like education or local government, where challenges are not linear or isolated, we must treat policy implementation as a complex system intervention, requiring iteration, adaptation, and trust.

This means using tools like rubrics and milestone dashboards, but also returning to the fundamental equity questions:

- Are we still centering those furthest from opportunity?
- Are outcomes being measured equitably?
- Is the community still at the table—and not just as observers?

Accountability isn't punitive—it's relational. It means acknowledging blind spots, naming systemic barriers, and refusing to accept incrementalism when harm persists.

## 6.4. Capacity Building and Training

Implementation often demands new skills, especially in racial equity work. Whether redesigning school safety policy or shifting to restorative practices, people must be supported to succeed. This includes professional learning, workshops, coaching, and structured onboarding for new staff or leadership. At CPS, we embedded this into our District Equity Report, which assigned equity goals to departments, set timelines, and included budget accountability. We knew that without continuous development, even the

most robust policies would falter in practice. In community co-design, that capacity building extends to the community as well—training family members to understand budgeting, empowering students to co-lead initiatives, and building institutional memory that outlives leadership turnover.

## 6.5. Monitoring Progress and Adjusting (Continuous Improvement)

Implementation must be understood as cyclical, not linear. Early indicators—like feedback surveys, participation rates, or implementation fidelity—should be reviewed regularly, with room to pivot. Minor issues can become systemic if ignored. Conversely, timely adjustments can strengthen trust and effectiveness. This feedback loop is not just technical—it's cultural. How are we building a responsive institution? Are we creating the conditions to hear what doesn't work—and to respond without defensiveness?

## 6.6. Institutionalization and Culture Change

Sustaining equity practice means embedding co-design into the institution's DNA. That includes:

- Codifying new processes through policy
- Embedding changes in strategic plans and budgets
- Establishing standing structures for community input (e.g., Equity Advisory Councils)
- Planning for leadership transition and onboarding

But the deeper transformation is cultural. During the co-design of the School Quality Rating Policy—abolished in 2022 after being publicly named as racist—we unearthed not only policy flaws but ideological ones. Created with "good intentions," SQRP embedded neoliberal assumptions about achievement, merit, and effort. It ignored the racialized disinvestment that shaped student experiences: underfunded schools, harsh surveillance, inadequate facilities, and community trauma.

When schools on the South and West Sides are closed, it is not a data issue—it's a design issue. The system was structured this way. Disparities in education, health, emergency response, and access to basic services are not coincidental. They are the product of decisions made—and unmade—over decades. Sustaining praxis means we name racial capitalism and its material consequences. We do not allow equity to become a peripheral talking point. We institutionalize the pause: the reflection, the audit, the community input, and the redistribution.

## 6.7. Maintaining Community Engagement

As implementation unfolds, excitement may wane. Bureaucracy creeps in. Community partners may feel sidelined. To counter this, institutions must:

- Keep engagement meaningful and interactive
- Demonstrate that input is shaping action
- Celebrate progress together—both symbolically and structurally

From ribbon cuttings to stipends, acknowledgment matters. So does transparency: publish meeting notes, share progress reports, highlight course corrections, and name the co-designers who shaped the work. When Englewood's community-led solutions are implemented—such as Elected Local School Councils or student-led wellness programs—they must remain in community hands, with shared governance, ongoing training, and feedback loops.

Over time, these initiatives can become not just programs, but precedents—models for replication in other neighborhoods and systems. That is the true measure of sustainability: when co-designed work reshapes not only outcomes, but norms and expectations.

## Closing Reflection

Sustaining praxis means we never lose sight of these deep equity challenges tied to historical and current inequities, compounded disadvantage, and the impacts of racial capitalism. They aren't some peripheral talking point once a year; we keep them at the forefront of our thinking. That's why at CPS, we created a District Equity Report transparently tracking equity challenges in policy, practices, initiatives, and systems, assigned them to Offices and Departments, created action plans, and budgets. Sustaining praxis means we set timelines as organizations and processes that serve as checkpoints and institutional equity pauses. We are not solving for a simple glitch or building a technical tool. We are transforming institutions in the context of historical inequity and ongoing racial capitalism. That work does not end with policy adoption. It begins again with each cycle, each adaptation, each new co-design moment.

This chapter prepares us for the final phase: evaluation and institutional learning—the process of measuring what matters, learning from the work, and ensuring that equity practice continues to evolve toward justice.

# CHAPTER 7: EVALUATION, MONITORING, AND ITERATIVE IMPROVEMENT

This chapter is all about follow-through, and that begins at the beginning of the process with a commitment to non-negotiables driven by community input. Evaluation and monitoring are a continuation of the equity audit and community listening campaigns. At the beginning of the process, we ask: "Who is most impacted?" "How do we know?" Now we can add: "How do we measure policy impact to improve practice and change the policy in the future about equity challenges identified?" For example, we said that policy improvements for the Student Code of Conduct would drive down disproportionate out-of-school suspensions, though what happened in practice?" Sometimes, reaching for equitable outcomes can reproduce the same inequities, create some new ones while addressing others, or increase inequities. We must remember, as Charles Payne argues in So Much Reform, So Little Change, that reform and the pursuit of equity are reified into the status quo and become it, and so, when is it indistinguishable?

Eubanks, Parish, and Smith (2009), identify two types of discourse in schools: Discourse I unintentionally maintain the status quo even while working to transform it; so, the language around changing the system is built into the same problem we are solving for; and Discourse II that is uncomfortable, driven by lived experience, and focused on systemic issues and root causes. Just as consciousness precedes science and the instruments we use to frame it (a concept known as instrumentalism), so is the relationship between inequities and schools and the problems we are solving for. In both cases, the language we use exacerbates or mitigates the inequities that exist. Like the two-slit experiment in quantum mechanics, our role as observers is not neutral; rather, it influences our lived experiences in schools and is often dictated by dominant white culture. Bias and discrimination are components of consciousness, showing the lack of neutrality in our role as observers. Rather, the people, places, and periods – our positionality and situatedness – impact what part of the elephant's trunk we feel, what part of the unified field in which we stand, and our relationship to time (to compare to $e=mc^2$); and time, in this case, we could see as power, racism, and systems of oppression. Thus, educators and municipal servants must reflect on how they show up, which includes implicit biases, their beliefs, lived experience, and values. Implicit bias is often decried as a low bar for racial equity practitioners and an entry point to the rest of the iceberg of lived experience and human cognition.

Whether implicit or not, we must critically self-reflect on our in-itself versus our for-itself, as Sartre stated: who am I and what is my role? What do I know about the lived experiences of those I serve, and we add to Sartre a focus on race: how does that

relate to how I show up in the skin I am in? What might my least served stakeholder – student, resident, parent – aspire toward based on their own volition? When we evaluate, we return to the challenge we were solving for, how we measured it, and whether it has any notable impact on the root causes.

Part of my job at Chicago Public Schools was to take the balcony view on Board Policy from an equity standpoint and work to create convergence aligned with the CPS Equity Framework, the 4 dimensions of the equity lens, and the guiding principles of racial equity and targeted universalism. The work was informed by the ongoing equity audit of policy and practice I had been engaged in through the trajectory of my career: the listening campaign model developed in partnership with community leaders in Englewood and West Englewood focus on education priorities in the wake of school closures, my master's thesis at Northwestern University focused on 49 schools closed and the impact of Chicago, and my educational leadership and municipal service. When you work for the Central Office in the 4th largest school district, and there is no elected school board and mayoral control, you are both an educational and municipal leader. Our role is to reverse the compounded disadvantage and downward churn of particularly Black, Brown, Indigenous, migrant, Muslim, transgender, female, non-binary, those with physical and cognitive differences, and other most impacted communities in Chicago with a focus on people, place, and period.

## 7.1. Equity Metrics That Matter

When I worked on the Culturally Responsive Education and Diversity Policy at Chicago Public Schools, here is a snapshot of measures of growth as it applied to a policy meant to amplify cultural responsiveness and anti-racism across Chicago Public Schools as it applied to all CPS staff:

- Percent of staff and schools meeting cultural responsiveness competencies through observation cycles and internal assessments
- Percent of classrooms aligning with culturally responsive environment indicators
- Percent of staff participating annually in equity and anti-racism professional learning
- Percent of staff meeting anti-bias requirements and engaging in equity-focused development
- Percent of schools and departments with declining incidents of microaggressions and discrimination
- Percent of schools earning workforce equity endorsements

These metrics were not abstract—they were rooted in the lived realities of CPS students, staff, and families. During our community listening campaign, people were clear: cultural

responsiveness had to be non-negotiable. Many called for automatic termination of staff found to be willfully racist, even at the microaggression level. The expectation was strict, collective accountability.

Our assessment practices must be rooted in anti-racism and critical pedagogy, and there must be outcome measures related to cultural responsiveness work and equity facilitation baked into the DNA of institutions. At a base level, all staff should be conceptually aspiring toward continuous improvement in affirming the cultures, races, and identities of the students, staff, and stakeholders they serve, and feel it's part of their job to do so. What I heard from countless CPS staff members, students, parents, and community members during the listening campaign for the redesign of the 1991 Multicultural Education and Diversity Policy that came into existence in response to a 1980 Consent Decree, is that if staff members were especially willingly racist, even on the level of microaggressions, then they should be 'pink-slipped.'

The feeling, especially post-summer of 2020, was that there needed to be strict accountability in upholding the norms of cultural responsiveness and anti-racism, and the onus needed to be collective. The process of identifying an equity challenge while engaging in an equity audit and community co-design never truly ends because evaluation brings us back to the beginning of the cycle. It's important for an institution to create ways of measuring the success of the community co-design effort through quarterly research and development (R&D) cycles, where we revisit the pre-conditions, which reflect the competency attainment model, and a community co-design evaluation tool, like a rubric. The Equity Policy Rubric Workbook at CPS was a co-design tool because it mandated the process outlined here: beginning with who we are in the skin we are in, understanding the equity challenge by people, place, and period, and iterating on the equity challenge and the multiple equitable solutions through the process, with a focus on those furthest from opportunity.

The assessment of our culturally responsive community co-design efforts needs to marshal institutional leaders forward. Many want to do the work, though have seen what happens – i.e., equity leaders being maligned, retaliated against, etc. - when they do it without the explicit approval and direction of leaders, so it's a full circle with the precondition of senior leadership in place. One of the measures that's most important overall and illusory measures overall is the impact on public perceptions of trust, as municipalities and school districts rarely, if ever, ask that polling question. After all, what's the value of people believing in and moving with an institution? Many of us are privileged enough to remember a time in an institutional space where we felt we belonged; a teacher who believed in us and pushed us to be the best versions of ourselves; increasingly today, it's a privilege and not a right dictated by race, income, gender identity and expression, and zip code. Yosso (2005) highlights how we focus on financial capital, though there are many other valuable forms like social capital, and an increase in public trust further creates positive connections in the system itself, which help to reduce inequities. Still, a

system designed without a focus on addressing and monitoring harm logically would not track or evaluate the impact on measures like public trust, the impact on forms of capital, productive connections, or policies aiming to ameliorate the many root causes and corollaries associated with inequities.

## 7.2. Public Trust and the Unmeasured Indicators

One of the most elusive and under-evaluated metrics in municipal and education systems is public trust. When was the last time a district or city asked its people: Do you believe in this institution? Do you trust us? Yet this is the bedrock of effective governance. We've all heard "we measure what we value" and "a budget is a moral document." In this case, we must measure using the opportunity indicators in the equity audit and pair with what we garner about community epistemology and the deep roots of culture through community co-design sessions, and we will need all new and revised policies and practices to reflect the institutional commitment to community co-design, cultural responsiveness, and equity-based leadership. The opportunity indicators disaggregated by people, place, and period at the beginning of the process and tied to the equity challenge should support the triangulation of outcome measures in the evaluation phase, if not sooner.

Trust, like social capital, is foundational. Our outcome measures must triangulate traditional opportunity indicators with community epistemology, qualitative stories, and lived truths gathered through listening campaigns and empathy interviews. If our goal is equity, then our evaluation must reflect both the process and the outcome. We evaluate who was included. We evaluate the relevance of our metrics. And we evaluate the degree to which root causes were addressed.

## 7.3. Greater Englewood: A Community's Metrics

In the case of Greater Englewood, the juxtaposition of community-based measures of success or improvement compared to the district standard in both the 2013 and 2018 cases of 10 collective closures, the stark differences reflected in the deep roots are apparent. School closures were viewed in the listening campaign universally as negatively impacting community welfare by those experiencing the impact of the policy. If the leaders I spoke with in the Greater Englewood campaign were establishing measures of growth and success regarding the original equity challenges identified, then they would focus on:

1. Percent of community stakeholders engaged in rigorous community co-design
2. Percent of resource equity improvements in city and state funding
3. Percent of residents experiencing displacement or push-out
4. Establishment of an elected school board and rigorous equity-based policy evaluation

These weren't technical benchmarks. They were survival metrics. They were rooted in a vision of restoration, representation, and justice. They reflected an understanding of the problem deeper than any district data dashboard.

These are the top four priorities translated into outcome measures as they were raised during the listening campaign that took place in 2017 regarding school priorities in the wake of 10 school closures in 5 years from the standpoint of a statistically significant sample of Greater Englewood leaders, elected officials, students, parents, and community organization staff. The beauty of the co-design model is how each of the outcome measures is directly related to addressing the root causes of inequity identified. It's a way of recentering our organizational process in root causes we are aiming to ameliorate and mitigate to transform institutions into anchors of cultural and identity affirmation, belonging, and reflecting the deep roots of those most impacted by inequities. We measure what we value, what we are accountable for, and especially where we seek improvement. Questions of measurement are implied throughout the co-design process because we are engaging in equity as a process and outcome, so rigorous co-design measures throughout, course corrects, and prepares summative evaluations.

Equity as a process means we are measuring who is most impacted by people, place, and period while identifying the equity challenge, and then we measure which voices are included in the process, and this continues through what's the impact of the policy or practice improvements on the people, places, and periods who have experienced the brunt of systemic racism and oppression? I remember in my time at CPS working on district-wide redesign of the Culturally Responsive Education and Diversity Policy and the Naming or Renaming of Schools, Mascots, and CPS Spaces Policy, and working in Excel sheets with thousands of rows reflecting stakeholder input gathered through co-design sessions, empathy interviews, surveys, and a co-design network driving local listening campaigns. I worked with teams of undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Chicago to create a coding scheme and engage in qualitative coding of patterns, themes, and priorities, and this was ultimately presented to the Executive Cabinet as a decision memo.

It was a powerful reminder that evaluation isn't just data—it's dialogue. It's memory. Its meaning. When rooted in community co-design, evaluation becomes an act of collective reflection and collective accountability. It invites institutions to ask not only what we did do, but who we did become. Ultimately, evaluation is not the end of the co-design cycle—it is the beginning of a new one. Every assessment brings us back to the foundational questions: Who is most impacted? Are we improving their conditions? Are we honoring their voices?

## In Summary

Evaluation is not the end of the process—it's the return to our beginning. It asks whether the voices we centered shaped the outcomes, whether the inequities we named were

addressed, and whether the policies and practices we changed lived up to their promise. We measure who was included, what shifted, and how the root causes were engaged, not just as a compliance exercise, but as a reflection of our values. When rooted in community co-design, evaluation is memory, meaning, and movement. It's how we stay accountable—not only to the process, but to the people who trusted us to do it differently.

# CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING GOVERNANCE, REDISTRIBUTING POWER

Community co-design for equity is not a strategy of convenience – it is a reclamation of agency, dignity, and democratic governance. Across these 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 where institutions and leaders interrogate their roles in maintaining inequity. From there, it moves through intentional groundwork (establishing trust and preconditions), deep listening and equity analysis, and into the heart of the process: shared ideation, collaborative 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 co-design, 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 a 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 system-wide transformation requiring all district policies to undergo community-informed equity analysis. Under my leadership (and importantly, with community partnership), 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 our shared future.

But let's be clear: equity is not a destination, a box to be checked "done." It is a continuous cycle of reflection, engagement, repair, and redesign. As conditions evolve,

we must keep returning to the 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. In the end, though, the work doesn't live in a rubric or a framework – it lives in people.

It lives in the students who speak their truths, refusing to be silenced about what they need. It lives in the families who organize for their children's futures, even when past processes have let them down. It lives in leaders willing to learn, listen, and let go of control in favor of collaboration. It lives, ultimately, in you, in each of us who chooses to approach our institutions and communities with courage, humility, and the unwavering belief that those closest to the pain must be closest to the power.

In one of our Englewood sessions, a community elder told me, "We've been waiting to be let in. Now that we have a foot in the door, we're not going back out." That resonated deeply. The door to shared power, once opened, should never be shut again. The work ahead is to widen that door, to bring more people through it, and to reconstruct the room itself so that everyone belongs.

As I step back and consider what it will take to sustain and expand this approach, I recall the question that started my journey: What would it look like if the people most impacted by inequity designed the systems that shape their lives? Through this work, I have seen a glimpse of the answer: it looks like Englewood parents determining the fate of Englewood schools; like students rewriting discipline codes to reflect restorative values; like neighbors turning closed school buildings into community centers. It looks like governance reclaimed – not as an abstract ideal, but as a daily practice of co-creation between public servants and the public we serve.

There is, of course, much more to do. In Chicago and cities across the country, the inequities run deep in housing, healthcare, employment, and beyond. But the ethos of community co-design extends to all those arenas. The framework in this book is not a one-off project plan; it's a template for a new way of governing and problem-solving that can be adapted to any context where disparity and disconnection persist. I've already seen it taking root beyond education: in Chicago's approach to rapid response teams in the wake of COVID-19 and racial injustice; dynamic inquiry-based pilot projects in municipalities across Illinois through my work as a Director at C3E; in the Philadelphia Department of Public Health where the first Chief Racial Equity Officer was hired and given the task of working for convergence for racial equity and emphasizing co-design including the creation of a co-design based equity council.. The momentum is there.

As this manuscript comes to a close, I find myself returning to afro-futurist imagination – to the radical possibility that one day, society will treat acts of systemic racism with the gravity of physical assaults, because it recognizes them as the assaults on humanity that they are. In that future, perhaps, we will see policies of indifference and exclusion

prosecuted with the same zeal as overt acts of violence, because we finally understand they are violence. And perhaps we will see governance truly "of, by, and for the people" – not just in slogan, but in structure, with co-design as a norm of how we build budgets, make laws, and deliver services.

Getting there will require many more of us to become co-designers of our democracy. To do that, those of us inside institutions must continue to push, to invite, to yield space, and to protect the process from the inevitable pushback. Those outside must continue to step in, to speak up, to demand, and to dream.

The journey described in this book – from a question in a grad school classroom to a movement in a community – has taught me one overriding lesson: The expertise we need to solve our biggest challenges already exists in the communities we too often ignore. Reclaiming governance and redistributing power means trusting that expertise and building the tables where it can lead.

To everyone who has read this and is wondering, "How do I start this in my context?" – my answer is simple: start with the people. Start with listening. Start with critical self-reflection about your own role. Then bring folks together, share what you learn, and ask: What should we do about it, together? The steps will follow; the framework is here to guide you, but the heart of it is the mindset.

# 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 most impacted 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 underrepresented. 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 | 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 | 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 | 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 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| outcome is articulated. Contextual factors (history, socio-economic conditions) are ignored, leading to a shallow or misinformed understanding of the issue. | 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. | 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.). | 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 the 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 input has been incorporated in diagnosing causes. As a result, the understanding of why the problem persists is limited or off-target. | 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 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 achievement differences but not the bias in expectations or curriculum that contributes). | 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 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. | 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 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 a 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 a 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 the 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 has 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 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. | Some elements of the co-designed plan are being implemented, but progress is spotty. Responsibilities might be assigned primarily to institutional staff, with a limited community role in 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. | 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 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. | 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 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 upon 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 the 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: 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 & Sustaining Practice* | Implementation is led by a shared community-institution team. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | 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. |

# WORK CITED


1. Baker, E. (1969). *Developing leadership in the civil rights movement*. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Archives.
2. Bardach, E. (2012). *A practical guide for policy analysis: The eightfold path to more effective problem solving* (4th ed.). CQ Press.
3. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation. (2020). *A vision for Black lives: Policy demands for Black power, freedom, and justice*.
4. Blackwell, A. G., Pastor, M., & Ponder, S. (2017). *The curb-cut effect*. Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society.
5. Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. Longmans, Green.
6. Center for Urban Education. (2020). *Racial equity impact assessment framework*. University of Southern California.
7. Chicago Public Schools Equity Office. (2021). *CPS equity framework: A roadmap for systemic transformation*. Chicago Public Schools.
8. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
9. Critical Race Theory. (n.d.). Framework for analyzing how legal and policy structures uphold systemic inequities.
10. Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. St. Martin's Press.
11. Eubanks, V., Parish, K., & Smith, A. (2009). Disrupting the status quo: Discourse 1 and discourse 2 in equity work. *Journal of Social Justice, 18*(4), 101–118.
12. Fowler, F. C. (2013). *Policy studies for educational leaders: An introduction* (4th ed.). Pearson.
13. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
14. Garza, A. (2014). A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. *The Feminist Wire*.
15. Highlander Research and Education Center. (2021). *Participatory democracy and grassroots organizing: Lessons from the civil rights movement*.
16. hooks, b. (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. Routledge.
17. Howard, T. (2010). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
18. Indigenous Environmental Network. (2019). *Decolonizing governance: Indigenous-led frameworks for policy change*.
19. Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health. (2023). *Community-led co-design in municipal policy: Best practices for equity and inclusion*. Johns Hopkins University.
20. Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.

21. Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47–68.
22. Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
23. Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
24. Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
25. Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
26. NAACP Legal Defense Fund. (2022). *Equity in public education: Policy and practice recommendations*.
27. Occupy Wall Street. (2011). *Declaration of the occupation of New York City*.
28. Participatory Action Research. (n.d.). Collaborative inquiry model prioritizing community leadership in research.
29. Powell, J. A. (2012). *Racing to justice: Transforming our conceptions of self and other to build an inclusive society*. Indiana University Press.
30. Powell, J. A., & Ake, H. L. (2021). *Targeted universalism: Policy and practice*. Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society.
31. Ransby, B. (2003). *Ella Baker and the Black freedom movement: A radical democratic vision*. University of North Carolina Press.
32. Robson, C. (2011). *Real world research* (3rd ed.). Wiley.
33. SF-CESS. (2019). *Seeing the skin we are in: Racial identity reflection for equity leadership*. San Francisco Coalition of Essential Schools.
34. Singleton, G. E. (2015). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Corwin Press.
35. Southern Christian Leadership Conference. (1967). *The Poor People's Campaign: A call for economic justice*.
36. Steele, C. M. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do*. W. W. Norton.
37. Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.
38. Targeted Universalism. (n.d.). Policy framework ensuring equitable outcomes by addressing the needs of those furthest from opportunity.
39. Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1–40.
40. Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. University of Chicago Press.
41. Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69–91.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Liam R. F. Bird,** MPPA, is a seasoned leader in equity, policy, and education with over 15 years of experience designing systems that center justice and belonging. He is the founder and CEO of LRFB Equity Consulting, LLC, which partners with public and private institutions to co-create learning, accountability, and equity initiatives grounded in the voices of those most impacted. Through LRFB Equity Consulting, Bird has guided transformative projects in school districts, city departments, and higher education systems nationwide, emphasizing authentic community partnership.

Liam also serves as Learning and Education Director at the Center for Equity, Effectiveness, and Efficiency in Local Government (C3E), where he advances equity across local government systems in Illinois, with a particular focus on public education initiatives, including Dupage County and the City of Peoria. He was a founding Director of Racial Equity Initiatives of the Chicago Public Schools Office of Equity and has contributed to statewide and national equity initiatives, including the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois State Board of Education, and the White House Reach Higher Initiative.

A current doctoral student in Education Policy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Bird builds on his Master's in Public Policy from Northwestern University to bridge research, practice, and policy. He is the principal architect of the Community Co-Design for Equity Framework and the School Equity Audit Tool (SEAT), foundational resources for institutions seeking to transform decision-making processes through authentic community partnership.

**Connect with LRFB Equity Consulting:** [www.liambird.com](http://www.liambird.com)