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Research Article

What Is the Bottleneck: A Critical Examination of the Processes in Place to Work Toward Student Equity and "Achievement" at Two High Schools

Kyle William Resch*

School of Education and Human Services, Carroll University, Waukesha, the United States

Abstract

Educators are responsible for ensuring the academic "achievement" of all students. In Wisconsin, this "achievement" is primarily measured through standardized academic assessments. These assessments tend to favor White, middle-class students without disabilities. They emphasize narrow academic skills over broader indicators of "achievement," such as real-world problem-solving abilities, community building, critical thinking, and social engagement. Over-reliance on these assessments often drives school decisions, potentially leading to inequitable learning opportunities for certain student groups. This study investigated whether the systems in place at two high schools identified for demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" implemented practices that supported their goals of developing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. Implications include: engaging in conversations about institutional racism, encouraging teacher empowerment; working with families; focusing on racial equity via professional development, equity audits, and the use of a racial equity process in decision-making; and restructuring the state report card. The findings contribute to the literature supporting high school restructuring designed to meet the needs of all learners.

Keywords

Equity, Achievement, State Report Card, Opportunity Gap, Equity Audit

1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher Preparation

Educators play a central role in fostering the academic "achievement" of all students, often being evaluated based on student performance on standardized assessments [18, 66]. However, Connor et al. [11] argue that the reliance on standardized assessments to measure "achievement" is problematic, as it hinges on a single data point that fails to capture attributes not assessed by these tests. Moreover, these assessments frequently reflect inequitable learning opportunities rather than accurately measuring academic success.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) [44] defines the "achievement gap" as the discrepancy that occurs when one group of students consistently outperforms another, with a statistically significant difference in average scores. Castro-Villarreal and Nichols [8] suggest that high-stakes testing, introduced by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, disproportionately impacted marginalized groups, such as

*Corresponding author: kresch@carrollu.edu (Kyle William Resch)

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Black students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, students with intersectional identities—such as those who are Black and have disabilities—faced even greater negative effects [35, 44, 31].

1.2. Barriers to Student "Achievement"

Focusing solely on student outcomes perpetuates a deficit-based mindset by attributing academic success or failure solely to the students, rather than addressing the systemic barriers that affect academic performance [2, 16, 33, 53]. Milner [41] emphasized the importance of an opportunity gap framework, which examines how societal constructs impact student achievement. This framework holds educators accountable for dismantling barriers and providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. Connor et al. [11] further critique the "achievement gap" framework, noting that it tends to position White, middle-class, non-disabled students as the norm, against which all other groups are measured. Additionally, Okun [45] asserts that the school system was created from a White supremacist cultural framework, with values such as perfectionism, objectivity, individualism, urgency, and a preference for written communication. These values privilege students who resemble those in power.

1.3. Equity-Based Professional Development

One major barrier to student achievement is the inadequate preparation of teachers to instruct students with diverse learning needs [9, 29]. McIntosh et al. [38] found that many school reform efforts fail when professional development is not sustained, as teachers often abandon new practices before they see meaningful results. This lack of continued professional development also leads to a decline in the fidelity of implementation.

Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, the percentage of public-school students who were White decreased from 54 to 47 percent [64]. This demographic shift marked the first time that minoritized student populations outnumbered White students, highlighting the need for schools to be designed to serve all students effectively [1]. Fabionar [19] argued that school leaders must better understand how to navigate these changes and act as agents of social justice. Mansfield and Jean-Marie [36] also emphasize that school leaders cannot close achievement gaps through curriculum alone. Instead, they must engage in difficult conversations to address issues of discrimination, bias, inequity, and institutional racism.

1.3.1. Race Consciousness and Antiracism in Education

Being race conscious is the first step in the process to dismantle racist practices in schools [21, 47, 52]. Swanson and Welton [58] defined a person to be race conscious "if they are able to readily identify the problems associated with racism and are willing to participate in critical discussions about race… [and] undergo the process of unlearning racially oppressive habits of the mind and practices" (p. 736). DeMatthews et al. [15] identified that the crux of systematic action toward eliminating racist practices in schools is for school leaders to encourage school members to be antiracist.

Antiracism works to defeat racism at the individual and institutional levels [52, 60]. Individual racism manifests as the individual mindsets and practices of educators that put certain racial groups in harm. Gooden and O'Doherty [23] discussed that a teacher consistently punishing Black students for showing the same behaviors as White students would be an example of individual racism. Institutional racism is the failure of school leaders to address racist practices at the school. For example, when school leaders identify a pattern of Black boys being suspended at a greater rate than White students but fail to intervene. When school members do not collectively have antiracist beliefs, there can be a detrimental impact on the well-being of students of color [34].

1.3.2. Race Neutral Discourse and Resistance to Race-Based Dialogue

Race neutrality is a color-blind ideology that ignores that race plays a role with inequity, practices, and systems in place at an institution [6]. Individuals who have this perspective believe that racism is held by individuals and minimizes the institutional explanations for racism. Gooden and O'Doherty [23] argued that school leaders often retreat to race neutral discourse to alleviate discomfort or avoid tension.

Racial resistance is defined as "explicit and intentional actions to thwart race conscious or antiracist work" [58]. Discussions on race can often generate uncomfortable emotions and may even foster feelings of guilt, shame, or anger. Individuals often implement emotional, ideological, and performative 'tools of Whiteness' to maintain their prior hegemonic understandings [47]. For example, emotional tools may include a school leader's attempt to avoid feeling guilty by minimizing the role of race when discussing student outcomes [58, 65]. Ideological tools are when individuals share mainstream beliefs that allow them to avoid antiracist positions. Individuals enacting performative tools share examples of how they help people of color [58].

1.4. Teacher Beliefs and Critical Self-Reflection

Educators who adopt a deficit-based view of students often place lowered expectations on those students, which can negatively affect their academic performance [49, 55]. Atkins [3] argues that critical self-reflection is necessary for educators to examine their own biases and understand how their beliefs influence the educational system. Gorski [24] highlights that many teachers' deficit-based perspectives justify inequalities in the educational system and shift blame for low achievement to families rather than addressing systemic issues. An assets-based ideology, however, focuses on students'

strengths and potential, guiding educators to recognize what students can achieve [13, 26].

1.5. Strong School Support Structure

Educators can either perpetuate systemic barriers for specific student groups or work to eliminate these barriers, thereby providing equitable opportunities for all students [24, 67]. Frattura and Capper [20] argue that instead of placing responsibility for educating students with diverse needs on a few teachers willing to enter co-teaching partnerships, all educators should share this responsibility as part of co-serving teams. Such a collaborative structure allows educators with varying areas of expertise to create learning environments that support diverse students' needs.

Furthermore, school leaders should ensure that classrooms reflect the demographics of the school population [17, 27]. DeMatthews [14] suggests that the greater the number of stakeholders involved in a student's education, the greater the support network they can access. For students whose families lack resources to assist with homework or other educational needs, support teams can provide a safety net, ensuring that these students do not fall behind their peers [10, 30, 62].

Rethinking Traditional Structures Based on Student Need

Equity audits serve as a tool to evaluate the structures in place within schools and determine whether they are serving all students equitably [59, 63]. Frattura and Capper [20] define an equity audit as a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of the school district, from the mission statement to student programming, district data, and the allocation of staff. School leaders must critically reflect on whether the existing structures are benefiting all students or just a specific group [24, 53].

2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the systems in place at two high schools identified for demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" implemented practices that supported their goals of developing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. The research questions that guided this study are:

1) What process is in place at these schools to support developing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students?
2) Do the processes put in place provide equitable access to students?

3. Methods

3.1. Design of the Study

Creswell and Poth [12] explained, "We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue" (pp. 45-46). This study utilized qualitative methods to investigate the complex processes by which school leaders and educators develop structures to support all students. The aim was to examine how educators collaborate to meet the diverse needs of students. To capture the nuanced interactions between school leaders and educators, data were gathered through interviews and observations.

Merriam and Tisdell [40] highlighted the importance of interviews in understanding behaviors, feelings, and interpretations that cannot be directly observed (p. 108). Semi-structured interviews were thus well-suited for exploring how school personnel addressed the needs of all students and whether they continuously reassessed and responded to emerging challenges. As Creswell and Poth [12] noted, observations are a vital data collection tool in qualitative research, capturing phenomena through the observer's senses (p. 166). In this study, observations focused on the discussions among school leaders and educators regarding the implementation and ongoing evaluation of equitable access for all students.

Ecological systems theory guided this study to understand how the beliefs of educators impacted school-based decisions and whether they provided equitable access to learning opportunities for all students [7]. Observations of planning meetings and semi-structured interviews were implemented to address the complex nature of the problem studied [12].

3.1.1. Selection of Schools

In this study, I employed a combination of typical sampling and snowball sampling techniques. The use of snowball sampling was particularly instrumental in identifying schools within the community that were recognized for demonstrating high levels of student "achievement" and providing equitable opportunities and support for students with disabilities. According to Swaminathan and Mulvihill [57], snowball sampling is employed for populations that are difficult to access and refers to the practice of asking participants for referrals, which can lead to a more robust sample size. I utilized snowball sampling to identify schools where "achievement" was defined by metrics beyond the results of standardized assessments, thereby broadening the scope of schools and perspectives on student "achievement."

The process to identify schools known for high levels of achievement and student support began with an initial email sent to local organizations and agencies, inquiring whether they could identify any high schools demonstrating high levels of student "achievement." I reached out to organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, Voices de la Frontera, Urban Ecology Center, Disability Rights Wisconsin, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Once these organizations provided recommendations of high schools meeting the criteria for high levels of student "achievement" and student support, I conducted follow-up phone calls to confirm that these schools met my inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1).

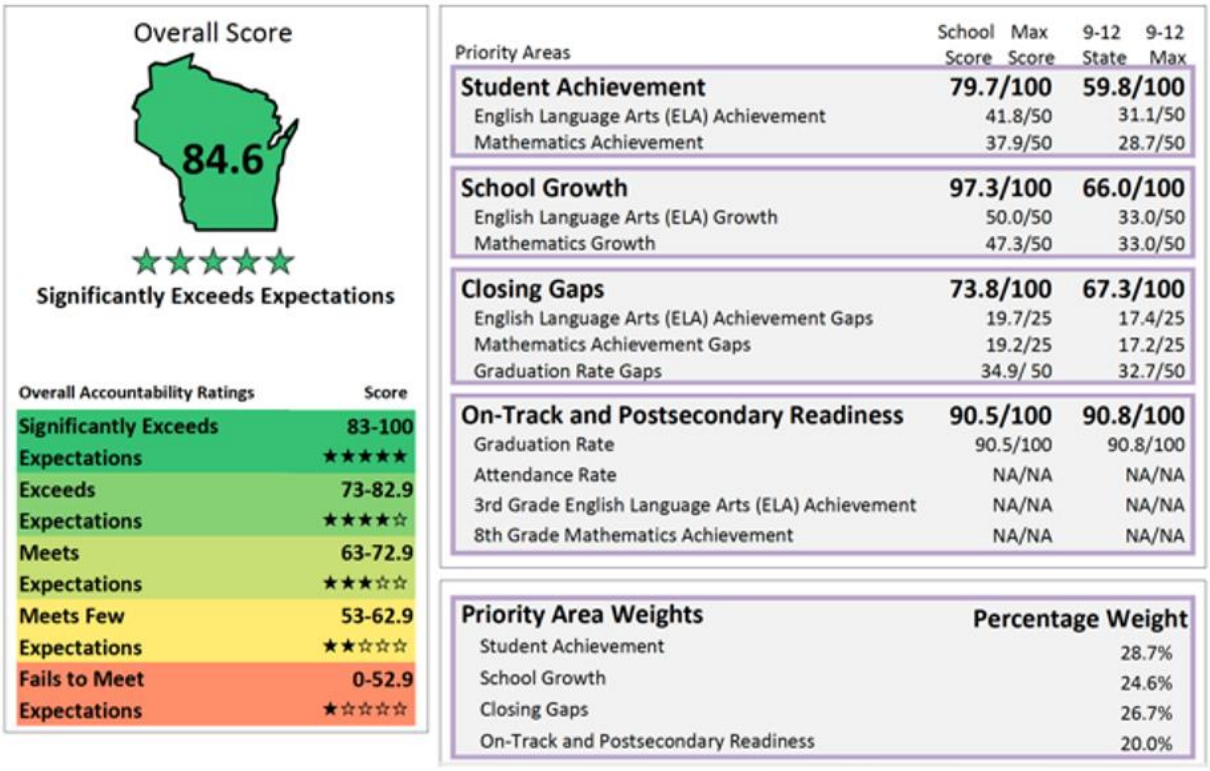
Table 1. *Site Selection Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria.*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
High school has a minimum special education enrollment 10% of total enrollment (state avg. is 13%)	High schools that have special education enrollment less than 10% of total enrollment
Organization rationale for "achievement" is based on evidence or example that can be verified	Organization does not provide verifiable examples or evidence

Note: Criteria outlined for a high school to be used in this study.

Swaminathan and Mulvihill [57] wrote that typical sampling is used when a researcher is "looking for cases that are unusual—a case of a dramatic failure or success" (p. 38). To better understand the practices educators implemented to close the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities, I used typical sampling to determine high schools that had earned a minimum of Exceeds Expectations on the Closing Gaps strand of the state report card, which reports annually on public school performance.

Given that the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities has not significantly decreased at the national level [44], I sought to examine how a high school had been successful in addressing this gap. To identify such schools, I employed typical sampling [40] and focused on high schools that had earned at least an "Exceeds Expectations" rating in the Closing Gaps category of the state report card. This criterion was selected because the Wisconsin DPI [66] uses state report cards (see Figure 1) as an accountability tool to evaluate and publicly report the performance of public schools annually.



Note: This figure is a sample 2018-2019 school report card for a high school in Wisconsin.

Figure 1. *Sample Wisconsin School Report Card.*

DPI [64] evaluated student "achievement" by comparing the school's average composite scores in reading and math on standardized assessments to state and national averages. Growth was measured by comparing the average reading and math composite scores from one year to the next. The state assessed whether schools were closing gaps by evaluating

how much a school had improved the performance of lower-performing target groups compared to comparison groups (see Figure 2). For instance, students with disabilities were compared to their peers without disabilities.

School Target Group	Statewide Comparison Group
American Indian or Alaskan Native	White
Asian	
Black or African American	
Hispanic/Latino	
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	
Two or More Races	
Students with Disabilities	Students without disabilities
English Learners	English proficient
Economically Disadvantaged	Not economically disadvantaged

Figure 2. *State Target Groups Alongside State Comparison Groups.*

Note: DPI [64] determined the target groups based on historically marginalized populations for whom DPI has seen "achievement" gaps.

Based on the established criteria for identifying schools that have implemented effective support systems for students and successfully addressed the achievement gap, two high schools were identified and are detailed below.

3.1.2. Sites of Study

East High School (EHS), an urban high school located in southeastern Wisconsin, was identified using typical sampling. During the 2020-2021 school year, the school had an enrollment of 1,384 students. Of the students enrolled, 159 (11.5%) were identified with a disability label, 65 (4.7%) students were English learners, and 778 (56.2%) were economically disadvantaged. EHS employed 118 faculty members, 22 (18.6%) of which were in the special education department.

Central High School (CHS), a suburban high school located in southeastern Wisconsin, was chosen by implementing snowball sampling. During the 2020-2021 school year, the school had an enrollment of 1,087 students. Of the students enrolled, 121 (11.1%) were identified with a disability label, 10 (0.9%) students were English learners, and 220 (20.2%) were economically disadvantaged. CHS employed 152 faculty members, 25 (16.4%) of which were in the special education department.

3.1.3. Participants

I contacted the principal of each high school to help with the recruitment of participants. The school principals informed me of educators who were familiar with, or involved in, the decision-making process to create access to learning opportunities for students with disabilities. After conducting my initial interviews and observations, participants suggested additional individuals who were able to provide valuable information to this study.

At EHS, I interviewed five participants: Lacey, a Special Education Coordinator, who divided her time between three high schools; Amy, Caitlin, and Maria, all Special Education teachers; and Kiara, a Transition Coordinator. At CHS, I interviewed six participants: Mason, a School Counselor; Mindy, a School Social Worker; Morgan, a Literacy Instructional Coach; Kim, a Math Instructional Coach; Jason, an Associate Principal; and Jada, a Social Studies teacher and Equity and Engagement Support Teacher.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was gathered through a series of observations of planning meetings, debriefings, field notes, audio recordings, and interviews of educators prior to and after observations. Data was collected until a point of saturation [12]. Data was gathered over a period of six months which provided an abundant opportunity to collect meaningful data and allowed me to observe whether strategies discussed during meetings were implemented.

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with 11 participants prior to my observations to gain an understanding of the initial systems in place and to understand the role of each member. I also completed a series of six semi-structured follow-up interviews with the same individuals. Information obtained from my observations was used to develop follow-up questions for a second round of interviews.

3.2.2. Observation Protocol

An observation protocol was used to guide a series of eight observations of data meetings focused on the "achievement" of students with disabilities. Each observation ranged in length from forty to sixty minutes and took place after the initial interviews. The observations were conducted throughout the school year, so I could develop insight on how educators monitored whether the current system was effective. During each observation, I noted the topic of conversations along with faculty interactions, the norms that structured the meeting, nonverbal communication, and items that my recordings did not identify such as visuals, diagrams, or charts [22, 40].

3.3. Data Analysis

For the analysis of my transcripts and observation notes, I employed the line-by-line coding approach as outlined by Glesne [22]. I meticulously reviewed my raw field notes, coding each line with brief descriptive terms to identify emerging themes from my observations and interviews. After the initial coding, I revisited my research questions to ensure that the data coded aligned with the objectives of answering those questions. During the initial coding phase, I maintained an open approach, allowing any relevant themes to emerge

from the observation and interview transcripts. In the second round of coding, I focused on identifying specific themes pertinent to supporting students with disability labels.

Merriam and Tisdell [40] describe Category Construction as a stepwise process for analyzing qualitative data. Initially, the interview transcripts and field notes were read through, employing open coding to assign general themes. After completing the open coding, analytical coding was conducted to group the initial codes into broader categories or themes. During the final phase of coding, I developed specific codes that directly addressed the elements of my research questions.

The second coding process involved re-evaluating and re-coding the data to more precisely capture the information from the interview transcripts and observation notes. According to Saldana [50], second coding serves to reclassify prior codes into more appropriate categories, refining the data into fewer and broader themes. In this phase, I condensed the initial codes into categories centered around the actions of school staff and the content discussed during the meetings. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell [40], terms can be combined during the second coding phase, and I merged similar themes into singular categories for greater clarity.

The code labels were derived from the literature, descriptive terms, or direct quotes from the participants [12]. For instance, during interviews with school staff who worked closely with students with disability labels, I utilized codes directly reflecting the participants' language. Codes such as "Equity PD" and "Support Teams" were applied to capture the support structures at the school that assisted students with disability labels.

After completing the initial round of coding, I reviewed the codes and initiated the category construction process. This phase of analysis prompted deeper reflection on the data and led to additional questions. As part of this process, I reached out to several participants via email to seek clarification on certain responses. I also contacted participants to ask follow-up questions that emerged after reviewing the data. Upon receiving further clarification, I revisited the line-by-line coding of the new data, categorizing the codes based on thematic similarities. Finally, I revisited my research questions to ensure that the categories were aligned with the key elements of my inquiries.

4. Results

Participants shared an understanding that there are current school structures that are not equitable for all students. Although there have been some processes instituted to make schools more equitable, there are still practices in place that perpetuate inequitable access to learning opportunities for some students. Although educators took steps towards providing equitable access to education, it was not always truly provided.

4.1. Race Consciousness

Lacey, the Special Education Coordinator at EHS, explained, "our population of students that has the most challenges is our Black males, particularly those with an emotional behavioral disability." Lacey elaborated that "there is the inherent bias that exists in education, that exists among our teachers… Our teaching staff is a largely White staff." Maria, a Special Education teacher, shared that conversations focused on "knowing that in schools, students of color are disproportionately bearing the brunt of disciplinary action." Lacey and Maria expressed that a cultural mismatch exists between the White teachers and their students. However, they did not share that steps were being taken to address this known problem.

In contrast, Caitlin, a Special Education teacher, explained that teachers at EHS are "inclusive of multiple identities… we as a staff really promote acceptance of all identities, all backgrounds, all races, all heritage." She further explained that an awareness of inclusiveness is promoted through "book clubs on race... [focusing on] how to better incorporate conversations about race [into the curriculum], especially since we have a pretty high White percentage staff." Maria clarified that the book club was "an optional book study for staff." When asked if there were objectives aligned with the book club, Maria stated, "There probably were. Not that I remember offhand. I think [it was meant to] just hav[e] a space to converse with staff members about issues of race in the classroom." Although opportunities existed to facilitate faculty collaboration on race, they were often voluntary and did not appear to be a building priority.

EHS also provided teachers with opportunities to better understand issues of race and equity. For example, Caitlin explained that "There's one this year called The LiberatED… I personally did not participate because I had a conflicting thing, but I've heard it's awesome." Like the optional book clubs, there was not a structured school-wide presentation required for all school members, suggesting that [professional development (PD)] that focuses on furthering the understanding of racial equity was not a priority.

When responding to a question regarding whether she discusses equity with her colleagues, Maria said, "Off the top of my mind, thinking about conversations of race or equity… I cannot think of any recent [discussions] that [have] come up at a department meeting." Similar to the lack of structured PD, conversations on racial equity did not appear to be widespread at EHS.

Participants at CHS expressed an understanding of inequities within the school system. Morgan, an Instructional Coach, acknowledged the existence of academic gaps among Black and White students attending CHS. He explained that the academic gaps were a result of systemic racism in schools:

Our African American population historically underperforms according to any other group...why are there such a

disproportionate low representation of African American kids reading at grade level or reading at a very high level? So unfortunately...systemic racism that exists within our schools, within our society has prevented certain kids from being as successful as they can be.

Like Morgan, Jason explained, "Our entire school system is built for White affluent people to be successful, and if you're not that normative coming in, there's gonna be systemic roadblocks to becoming successful." Morgan and Jason were aware that the existing "achievement" gaps amongst racial groups were the result of an education system that privileges White students and places other students at a disadvantage.

Mason, a School Counselor at CHS, stated, "Students of color traditionally are less apt to ask for help… We have to drag them to the table a little bit more than…our Caucasian students or Asian students." Mason is aware that students of color struggled to seek out assistance at CHS. However, there did not appear to be a more in-depth reflection on the causes of these differences. Mason did not consider that asking for help is an attitude and skill established in certain families and communities based on assumptions of rights, trust, and entitlement. Additionally, he could work to find other avenues to address the needs of students instead of placing responsibility on the students.

Jada, a Social Studies teacher, communicated that she would like her colleagues to focus less on the "achievement" gap and spend more time examining the systemic processes in place at CHS: "[We need to] change the structural sense within our school to not focus solely on this Black versus White divide, which inherently is based on testing that isn't necessarily for the benefit of students of color anyway." Jada understood that inequities based on race were further solidified by the outcomes of standardized tests, but acknowledged that more work had to be done.

Participants at both schools recognized that systemic inequities existed between students of color and White students. At EHS, they communicated that conversations on racial inequities were becoming more prevalent in the building. However, it appeared that improving racial equity was not a priority since examples of these conversations were not in evidence and many of the professional development opportunities were voluntary. At CHS, faculty voiced an awareness that systemic racism was present in schools. Despite awareness and discussion around race, steps toward action still needed to occur. However, awareness and discussion are the first steps toward enacting change.

4.2. Awareness That Students with Disabilities Have Different Experiences

Participants at CHS expressed an awareness that students with disabilities have different experiences at school compared to their peers without disabilities. For example, Jada, a Social Studies teacher at CHS, related that she had a student in her class that "had an IEP in middle school but decided not to have an IEP in high school because of the stigma." Jada noted that some students are more susceptible to experiencing a negative self-image because of the perception of students receiving special education services.

In addition, Lacey, the Special Education Coordinator at EHS, elaborated on the perception of students with disabilities. She shared, "At [EHS]…there is still a big difference between the mindset of teachers in terms of a successful student with an IEP and a successful student without. And bridging that mindset is a challenge at [EHS]." Lacey communicated that students with disabilities may not be held to the same high expectations as their peers without disabilities.

Similarly, Jason, an Associate Principal at CHS, explained that students with disabilities are not well-represented in higher-level courses. Jason stated that "Our next steps are… [having natural proportions in] those upper-level courses." He emphasized that he was proud that most of the general education classes consisted of natural proportions. However, he acknowledged that students with disabilities were rarely enrolled in upper-level courses. Lacey agreed and explained that "When you get into the higher-level classes, there are fewer and fewer students [with disabilities] who are in those [higher level classes]" at EHS.

Lacey shared that she believes teachers want to include students with disabilities but "there's a hard time moving from the mindset of, so [students with disabilities] can't do it, to how do I need to adjust this, so that this is accessible to this student." In regard to what was preventing teachers from shifting their mindset, she explained, "Not all teachers… get that training, they don't know. And so, there is a tendency… to cluster what a student's needs are just because they have an IEP, versus understanding individual differences." Lacey indicated that teachers have not received the necessary training to differentiate curriculum; however, it appeared that there was not a process in place to help teachers design curriculum for diverse students.

Not only were students with disabilities struggling to access the curriculum, Jada, a Social Studies teacher at CHS, related that the Student Support Team (SST) started "noticing some disproportionality as far as grades with students of color with disabilities versus White students with disabilities." Jada clarified that more students of color with disabilities were failing classes than White students with disabilities. She further expressed that the team is "trying to figure out, is that an issue with rapport with teachers, is it an issue with non-cultural understanding, are [students of color] legitimately struggling academically, are [students of color] getting what they need from specific teachers?" Jada communicated that there is not only a difference in the way students with and without disabilities experience school, but the intersectionality of race and disability can create further differences.

The participants at EHS and CHS demonstrated an understanding that students with disabilities may have different experiences than students without disabilities. They commu-

nicated that stigma exists toward students in special education and teachers may have lowered expectations. At EHS, teachers were not consistently differentiating instruction that prevented some students with disabilities from accessing the curriculum. When developing curriculum, it is important to consider the questions Jada presented in the previous paragraph to address the needs of students.

4.3. Are Current Processes Benefiting All Students

Participants at both schools incorporated their awareness of inequities to support students. However, the structures put in place were often developed to help students meet the institutional definition of "achievement."

Lacey asserted that a key part of her role as the Special Education Coordinator at EHS was to make sure teachers are equipped to provide students with disabilities with the skills to be successful. She explained, "When I started this role at [EHS], I held meetings weekly with my EBD [emotional behavioral disability] teachers...and just going through each student...We spend a lot of time talking about that, changing your focus on not passing classes, but developing skills." It appeared Lacey chose to develop the capacity of a small group of teachers instead of developing a process to support all teachers in expanding their knowledge of working with students that have an EBD label. Although steps were taken to provide some teachers with strategies to work with students with an EBD label, there was not a systemic process in place to help general educators work with all students.

Similarly, there was not a system in place to address the mental health of students. In regard to the current process to address mental health, Caitlin, a Special Education teacher at EHS, stated, "I know what to do in individual cases. Like if a kid is having a mental health crisis...There's a whole list of people that I can contact, and they take it from there." In regard to mental health concerns that were not an emergency, Caitlin stated, "I think the process, I'm still trying to figure it out honestly." Maria, a Special Education teacher at EHS, shared that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue during virtual learning. For example, she described a conversation she had with one of her students:

> I got an email from a student... [It said something like,] 'This semester has gotten off to a terrible start… I was struggling with my mental health over winter break. I never really got back on my feet. I'm failing a lot of classes… I'm feeling overwhelmed…' And so, I was like, okay, we got plenty of time, grades aren't finalized until May. Let's start meeting...

When a student was struggling to manage their academics as a result of mental health challenges, the burden was on the student to reach out for help. Although Maria provided support to the student, the focus was on providing academic assistance instead of addressing the student's mental health needs.

Regarding mental health needs at CHS, Mason explained "We're getting our school social worker involved...before COVID, we were gonna have an actual therapy group." Mason further explained that the therapy group would take place during the school day and be paid for through the insurance of the students' parents. Mindy, a School Social Worker, further explained how the therapy sessions would be implemented at CHS:

> We talk about remov[ing] barrier of access [and] are looking into bringing an agency into our building to help families have easier access to therapy. The school would only be the space; the agency would still run as it would in their private office...

Mental health was identified as a significant barrier for many students to access their instruction. Traveling to receive mental health services was one barrier that school personnel worked to address by partnering with a local agency to provide services on site. However, this remedy for some created a barrier for others, who could be locked out of this service for financial reasons.

Educators tried to support students with virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one concern was the Pass/Fail grading policy created during virtual learning, and whether students who received a Pass grade had acquired the necessary skills to be successful in future classes. For example, during an SST meeting, Ron, a School Counselor, shared that a student named John was struggling in Spanish 2. Ron stated that, "Learning virtually…had different expectations for students than now…that students are back in-person." Mason, another School Counselor, interrupted and related that "There was a domino effect… even though [John] earned a P [Pass]… he does not have mastery of [the skills required] for Spanish 2." When there was a focus on credit attainment rather than skill development, a new barrier was created. When John did not develop the necessary foundational skills in Spanish 1, he struggled to be successful in Spanish 2.

During another SST meeting, Mindy discussed that Courtney, a student at CHS, was recently returning to school after being discharged from a treatment facility near the end of first semester. She explained that Courtney was a senior and well short of the 22 credits required for graduation. Mindy shared, "I don't think she's been to a single class this school year." She further added that the student "is super focused on a to do list … [however] even if we give her assignments…I don't feel that she has the skills to be successful just doing the assignments on her own." Mindy asked the team if they had ideas on how to close out the semester for Courtney because she did not believe it was fair to give a student all Fs when they were in a treatment facility. Ron concluded that Mindy "should communicate with teachers and ask if there is a path for the [student] to earn credit in their class and see what the responses are."

The conversation around Courtney focused meeting the institutional definition of "achievement," which focused on

credit completion and grades; Courtney's emotional and learning needs were not part of the discussion. It appeared that the burden would be placed on Courtney to complete a larger assignment instead of providing her with instruction that would develop her academic skills or addressing her mental health needs. The team members worked to develop a solution to help Courtney graduate. Although she may earn the necessary credits, it may come at the detriment of Courtney's long-term learning and emotional needs.

Participants at each school demonstrated an understanding that systemic inequities persisted in their schools. Although participants took initial steps to implement practices to support students, there were still opportunities for individuals to enact action to address existing barriers. At EHS, professional development opportunities were offered to discuss the impact of race in schools. However, these were optional, suggesting it was not a priority. At CHS, conversations focused on credit attainment in place of developing strategies to support the individual needs of students.

5. Discussion

Swanson and Welton [58] defined a person to be race conscious "if they are able to readily identify the problems associated with racism and are willing to participate in critical discussions about race." Additionally, Mansfield and Jean-Marie [36] wrote that "addressing issues of race in schooling, school leaders' heightened awareness of institutional racism is important in order to effectively create a school climate of openness and intellectual rigor and develop strategies for closing the achievement gap." The first step to remove racist practices in schools is to be aware that inequities exist and that they serve the function of benefitting the students that resemble those in power [47, 52].

At both schools, participants were aware that race-based disparities existed. They noted that schools were built with a White lens that placed students of color at a disadvantage. For example, at EHS, the participants explained that Black males with an EBD label face the most challenges in school due to the presence of biases and a cultural mismatch between the predominantly White teachers and the students of color. Similar to the race consciousness demonstrated at EHS, Jason, an Associate Principal at CHS, shared an understanding that the current school system is designed for White affluent students, and that other groups of students face additional barriers that may prevent them from being successful. Although faculty at neither school took significant steps toward transitioning their race consciousness into systemic actions, there were some steps taken to address the needs of some students. School members at EHS implemented individual teacher responses to address the needs of students and faculty developed a schoolwide support structure at CHS.

6. Implications

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that schools implement the following actions: a) Engage in conversations to identify and address institutional racism; b) foster teacher empowerment to create change; c) conduct an equity audit; d) partner with community organizations; e) invite families into the conversation; f) mandate pre-service preparation programs to include racial equity; g) mandate racial equity professional development; h) use racial equity process when making policy decisions; and i) restructure the state report card.

6.1. Engage in Conversations to Identify and Address Institutional Racism

Mansfield and Jean-Marie [36] argued that "achievement" cannot be reached by focusing on academics alone. For students of color to "achieve," school leaders must be willing to foster conversations with faculty members to identify and address racial discrimination, biases, and other forms of institutional racism within school curriculum and structures. Participants noted that students of color experience the most challenges within their school. However, little to no time was spent examining how the current structures may contribute to the institutional racism of the school. For example, when Mason, a School Counselor, said that students of color are less likely to ask teachers for help than White students, he did not interrogate the current system to understand what practices contributed to students of color not seeking assistance. Additionally, the support teams focused solely on academics and lacked a framework to reflect on the racial impact of their current practices.

It is critical for educators to reflect on the current practices being implemented to dismantle structures that contribute to the institutional racism of the school. Love [35] wrote "Abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, [and] new ways to be inclusive." School leaders cannot enact schoolwide changes if they do not understand what changes need to be made to benefit students of color and students with disabilities. School leaders need to seek out new perspectives to better understand the systemic changes that are required to meet the needs of all students, especially those with multiple identities, such as students of color that also have a disability label. I recommend that school leaders hold conversations with marginalized groups of students and families to learn what changes would improve the learning environment for all students.

6.2. Foster Teacher Empowerment to Create Change

School personnel at CHS constructed teams consisting of various members to identify and address barriers to student

"achievement." During these weekly meetings, team members often mentioned systemic barriers that prevented students from achieving. When these barriers were identified, team members responded in frustration and asked members to bring the issues to the District Leadership Team. Milner [42] recommended that educators identify barriers and then address them to prevent students from slipping through the cracks. CHS developed teams at the classroom and school level; however, there was not a process to collaborate with district leaders to enact schoolwide changes. I recommend that school leaders develop a streamlined process where school-based teams work with leadership teams to make changes.

6.3. Conduct an Equity Audit

Frattura and Capper [20] defined an equity audit as a complete analysis of every aspect of the school district from the mission statement to more specific pieces such as student programming, district data, and allocation of district staff. Conducting an equity audit is a useful process to identify the institutional practices that are discriminatory toward certain groups of students to better understand what aspects of the school system need to be changed [43, 46, 56]. For example, school leaders should analyze schoolwide data to understand the composition of the students that attend the school, status of labeling students, discipline data, "achievement" data, and the composition of students enrolled in classes [20, 60, 61].

Faculty at both schools demonstrated a commitment to addressing inequities once they were identified. However, an analysis of my findings showed that inequitable structures still existed at both schools. Additionally, it seemed that educators were aware of differences by race and ability but actions were not taken. For example, participants at EHS did not communicate a need to address the lack of differentiation occurring in some classes. I recommend that school leaders conduct an equity audit to help identify systems that need to be changed to provide equitable opportunities for all students.

6.4. Partner with Community Organizations

Partnering with local organizations can help to promote sustained academic growth by sharing financial burdens and obtaining additional resources [5, 51]. Both schools worked to partner with community organizations; however, the scope of their partnerships was limited. Scott et al. [51] suggested that school members partner with community organizations that share common goals and an assets-based viewpoint of students. I recommend that school personnel should integrate their school with community members to provide a range of supports and opportunities such as internships, job shadowing, mental health services, childcare services, and career counseling.

6.5. Invite Families into the Conversation

Participants at both schools shared a belief that it is important to build relationships with students and families to increase student "achievement." Both schools were comprised of a majority White faculty yet communicated that Black students were less successful than their White peers. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [66] communicated that many educators explain the existence of a race-based "achievement" gap with a deficit-based viewpoint that some students are not motivated to do well in school. They suggest that school members should engage in conversations with families to develop a strength-based framework to understand students that have a different culture than those in a position of power. Kressler et al. [32] wrote that school members should engage in conversations with students to provide them a voice in their learning experiences and empower families to help teachers understand how their child learns best. Ball et al. [4] wrote that there is a "longstanding power imbalance that exists between marginalized and oppressed families and school systems." They suggested that school leaders should implement a strength-based family engagement framework to develop trust and rapport with families to build a stronger school-family partnership. Based on the cultural mismatch that existed at both schools, I recommend that school leaders implement a family engagement framework to elicit a stronger partnership with families. Empowering families in the decision-making process will help to ensure the needs of students are being met.

6.6. Mandate Preservice Preparation Programs to Include Racial Equity

Participants at both schools recognized that racial disparities existed at their school. Additionally, they communicated that there was a desire to address some of the existing racial disparities, but there was a lack of understanding on how to engage students of all racial groups. Jupp et al. [28] wrote that when White teachers are first learning about White privilege and systemic racism, they often respond with silence, resistance, and colorblind dialogue. It is imperative to begin instructing pre-service teachers on how to examine school structures and question how they impact all students. Sleeter [54] suggested that pre-service programs should include a combination of coursework and fieldwork to better understand how to address racial equity in schools.

Pre-service programs should provide field experience that allows preservice teachers to visit communities that are different from their own. The coursework should provide culturally responsive teaching strategies and time for preservice teachers to reflect on key concepts and connect them to their own experiences and beliefs [28, 54]. Preservice preparation programs should include racial equity content to help future teachers better understand White privilege and how systemic racism impacts students in schools.

6.7. Mandate Racial Equity PD

To combat racist practices in schools, it is critical for edu-

cators to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy and implement antiracist practices [35, 52]. Participants at both schools showed an awareness that racial disparities existed; however, it appeared that they did not always fully understand the causes of the differences. For example, Mason noticed that students of color are less willing to ask teachers for help; however, he did not communicate a deeper understanding of the reasons a student may not seek assistance. Matias and Mackey [37] argued that since much of the teaching force is White, it is vital to provide teachers with PD that includes racial equity. To combat racial resistance, they suggested that a PD framework should include concrete pedagogical strategies. For example, multiple forms of media should be analyzed to better understand the multidimensional nature of race. Additionally, teachers should be exposed to counter stories that were not reinterpreted by the dominant culture to "reflect on the systemic consequences of racism" [37].

McManimon and Casey [39] wrote that PD must force teachers to more than just reflect on how White supremacy impacts the life of students in schools. They suggest that equity PD should "not just [be] about understanding, but also about action." DPI [66] suggested that equity PD should include understanding implicit bias and how it impacts teaching practices. PD should help educators analyze current practices at their school and theorize how those practices impact students. I recommend that schools implement mandatory racial equity PD that aligns with an action plan to address current inequitable structures.

6.8. Use Racial Equity Process when Making Policy Decisions

At times, faculty at both schools made school-based decisions without including a discussion on racial equity. The Great Lakes Equity Center [25] recommends that school personnel implement an equity-based framework when making decisions. An equity-based framework has three foundational components: 1) Inclusive, Co-constructive Planning; 2) School-based Supports; and 3) Outcome Measures.

Inclusive, Co-constructive planning is based on including key stakeholders in the decision-making process. For example, school leaders should seek input from students, teachers, principals, families, community organizations, government officials, and university researchers. Incorporating a range of perspectives will help to identify barriers to student learning and work to develop solutions. The second component, School-based Supports, focuses on the supports that are needed to improve a student's experience. The framework outlines the need to have an inclusive school culture, culturally competent educators, culturally relevant curriculum, access to extracurricular opportunities, and family engagement. The final component, Outcome Measures, emphasizes a need to shift away from solely relying on academics to measure success. The framework suggests that outcome measures should be based on the following: a) integrated schooling; b) equitable opportunities; c) improved social climate; and d) student success.

Given that both schools often defaulted to using the institutional definition of "achievement" when making decisions, I recommend that school leaders use an equity-based framework during the decision-making process. Using a specific framework will help include the voices of all stakeholders in the development of school decisions. Additionally, the framework will help school leaders consider student equity and the needs of students when addressing the school system.

6.9. Restructure the State Report Card

The current metrics used on the state report card to determine if a school is serving its students emphasize academic outcomes [66]. More specifically, the state report card has a narrow measurement of "achievement" that emphasizes credit completion and performance on standardized tests [66]. Provided that the literature has identified the intrinsic bias that exists within standardized assessments [8, 31], I recommend that the measures used to determine accountability should be altered. In addition to outcomes of standardized assessments, the state report should include a strand assessing schools on the level of supports offered, along with the level of impact that the support has on students. Finally, I recommend that a strand should be included to incorporate parent feedback toward the level of support offered at the school.

7. Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations identified during this study. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, all the interviews and observations were conducted virtually using Google Meets or Zoom. As a result of conducting virtual observations, I was unable to enter the high schools to observe whether participants were referencing materials or taking notes during the SST meetings. Additionally, not all participants were visible during the Zoom meeting making it more difficult to get a sense of any nonverbal communication that I could perhaps have investigated further with individuals.

A second limitation was that during snowball sampling there were school members who may have provided important information that were not willing to participate in this study because of COVID-19. I was informed that some school members were unable to participate because of the amount of time they had to commit transitioning to teaching virtually. Additionally, there were individuals at each school that were unable to participate due to being out of the school on family leave. Furthermore, the participants at EHS who volunteered to participate were only members of the Special Education department, even though I reached out to a wide variety of faculty.

A third limitation of this study was a lack of opportunity to

follow-up with every participant. At CHS, there was turnover on the administrative team that resulted in some participants leaving and others taking on new roles which limited their ability to commit additional time to this study. After the departure of two administrators, a couple of the participants were forced to cover multiple roles at the high school which impacted their availability.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to explore the processes is in place at two schools to support developing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students and whether the processes in place actually provide equitable access. Absent from this study were the perspectives of the students and their families along with the effectiveness of the school supports. I recommend that future research examine the following: a) student and family perspective; b) methods to measure effectiveness of support structures; and c) continuous review process.

8.1. Student and Family Perspective

Participants acknowledged that the teaching staff was predominantly White at their schools. Furthermore, they noted that the school system was built to affirm characteristics of White supremacy culture outlined by Tatum [45]. Research should investigate how students and families perceive "achievement" and understand how it compares to the perspectives of school personnel. Future research could work to better understand the perspectives of families of marginalized students to determine how to facilitate increased engagement with schooling.

8.2. Methods to Measure Effectiveness of Support Structures

This study explored the process to address student needs; however, methods to measure the effectiveness of these supports were not examined. Future research can seek to determine how to measure whether school supports are benefiting students. Developing a measure to determine effectiveness of a support can help co-serving teams determine whether current practices should continue or be changed to better provide access to students. Future research can help identify supports that have the greatest impact on student learning to help schools implement the support for all students instead of only after a student has struggled.

8.3. Continuous Review of Process

This study examined the structures in place to support students with "achievement." However, future research could strive to understand the process school leaders implement to ensure that the system is still meeting the needs of all students. For example, future researchers could investigate the process in place when there is faculty turnover to engage new staff with the goals of the school. Additionally, future researchers can work to understand the processes in place to re-engage faculty buy-in throughout the years.

9. Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the significant role that school structures and educator mindsets play in providing equitable learning opportunities, particularly for historically underserved students. Both schools acknowledged the existence of racial disparities and challenges faced by students with disabilities, which mirrors the findings of researchers like Connor et al. [11] and Milner [41]. These scholars stress the importance of addressing systemic barriers to student success, rather than solely focusing on individual student performance. Although both schools recognized these disparities, they struggled to implement lasting, systemic changes that would create true equity for all students. This aligns with the literature on race consciousness and antiracist education [58, 15], which emphasizes that simply being aware of these inequities is not enough. While both schools made some initial efforts to discuss race and equity, the lack of required, structured professional development and comprehensive action plans suggests that these discussions have not yet translated into meaningful changes, as noted by Mansfield and Jean-Marie [36].

The findings also highlight the critical need for better teacher preparation and stronger support structures for students with disabilities. As the literature suggests, effective systemic change requires shifting from a deficit-based to an asset-based approach [24, 48]. At both schools, the failure to fully address the needs of students with disabilities reflects a continuing struggle to move away from a narrow focus on standardized testing as the measure of success. This directly relates to the research questions of this study, especially regarding whether the current processes at these schools provide equitable access to learning opportunities. While both schools acknowledged the need for equitable opportunities, the persistent barriers and lack of action show that there is still much work to be done. Moving forward, schools will need to adopt equity audits, mandate professional development, and encourage deeper reflection on educator beliefs to address these gaps and make genuine progress toward achieving equitable outcomes for all students.

Abbreviations

ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
DPI	Department of Public Instruction
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics

NCLB	No Child Left Behind
EHS	East High School
CHS	Central High School
SST	Student Support Team
EBD	Emotional Behavioral Disability
PD	Professional Development

Author Contributions

Kyle William Resch is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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