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# Equity in K-12 Schools

School districts have an enormous responsibility for and impact on the lives of the students they serve. The events of the last few years have made District leaders increasingly aware of how disparities both inside and outside the classroom continue to impact student performance and ability to learn. In many districts, leaders are seeking innovative strategies to address those inequalities to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to be successful.

With greater demand from communities to address equity issues and implement new solutions, district leaders are at a crossroads in deciding how to effectively apply equity to their planning processes while responsibly managing their finances and providing required services for students.

There is no single correct answer to address equity in today's educational system. Equity challenges can look drastically different from community to community and even between school buildings within the same district. Before developing a plan to improve equity in their districts, parents, school leaders, administrators, and teachers must understand how these inequities manifest themselves. For example, racial and economic disparities are often amplified by the achievement gap between groups of students. Similarly, solutions to address critical problems can fail due to a lack of understanding of the barriers to access that students and their families face, such as internet access or transportation. Opportunities to increase equity can also present themselves in programs dedicated to English learners, special education students, gifted and talented students, and others with diverse educational needs, or in addressing the digital divide.

In order to work towards more equitable learning environments for children, an equity perspective must be built into a district's decision-making processes, including curriculum, finances, and overall operations. In turn, this first requires a thoughtful analytical approach to understanding the unique needs of the students, parents, and families in the districts they serve as well as an understanding of how each district operates and how it could change or improve.

Through its work with school district administrators across the nation, PFM has established itself as a leader in understanding school finance and operations. Our team stands ready to help school leaders to incorporate equity more fully into their budgets and to identify opportunities to apply resources more effectively and efficiently.

## What are some examples of including an equity lens in school budgeting?

- Identifying existing programs that address equity and highlighting gaps
- Adjusting budget practices for more efficient, effective, and equitable generation and allocation of programs and resources for students, staff, and across buildings
- Setting, resetting, and aligning budget goals and priorities to reverse historical disparities and emerging challenges
- Identifying and overcoming barriers to equitable services for students and families
- Using data to set metrics, track progress and improve communication and accountability
- Improving community and stakeholder engagement in the decision-making process



## Putting Equity into Practice

PFM's Management and Budget Consulting practice is comprised of professionals who have collaborated with a wide range of school districts to solve some of their toughest issues. Our team has a proven record of producing impactful results for clients, regardless of the type of challenges they face. Examples of our work include:

- **Multi-Year Financial Planning** to help districts identify specific challenges within their budget and operations. PFM works collaboratively with districts to construct targeted, sustainable solutions that are aligned to strategic outcomes and equitable goals.
- **Resource Allocation Analysis** to ensure that funding and other resources are distributed based on the needs of the student population, and in alignment with strategic goals and priorities. This could include analyzing staffing assignments, federal funds (Title and ESSER), special education services, allocations for curriculum and technology replacement, and more.
- **Capital Planning** to address necessary facility needs without putting undue financial strain on the district. Lack of investment can result in more frequent school closures, disruptions to students' learning, and health risks for students and teachers. PFM has also conducted analyses for specific areas such as building configurations and classroom usage to maximize districts' limited resources.
- **Best Practice Benchmarking** to better understand how school districts compare to selected peer districts based on demographics, economic characteristics, and other factors.
- **Operational Reviews** focusing on areas such as the business office, transportation, food service, custodial services, and more. PFM closely examines details of various operations to develop strategies to improve the return on investments and provide necessary services with improved efficiency and value.

Equity issues cannot be solved through intermittent or one-time investments. Successfully incorporating equity often requires changing approaches taken by school leaders and their stakeholders. With its expertise, PFM can support districts as they address institutional and structural barriers, evaluate outcomes, and develop solutions that promote financial stability and an equitable educational experience for all students.

If you are interested in learning more, please contact the K-12 Schools team members listed below. We look forward to working with you!

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### What questions should school leaders ask to incorporate equity into budget planning?

- What are the district's priorities or goals? How do they address the community's greatest equity challenges?
- What data about equity is available and how is it being used to guide decision-making?
- How are resources currently being distributed to programs and across buildings?
- How do you define and measure progress?