



NEPC Review: Equity Elementary: “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” Staff in Public Schools (Heritage Foundation, October 2021)



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Summary

A recent “Backgrounder” report from the Heritage Foundation, *Equity Elementary: “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” Staff in Public Schools*, objects to the increasing number of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) emerging on public school districts’ administrative teams. The report asserts that these increases can be linked directly to their presence in higher education, where CDOs are much more commonplace. The report claims that districts with CDOs have failed to close student achievement gaps in standardized testing outcomes, exacerbated performance gaps between white and minoritized students, and advanced the Critical Race Theory goals of leftist political activists. The conclusions were based on flawed research, including a failure to properly operationalize CDOs or their responsibilities, no collection of data on the magnitude of the achievement gap before CDOs were hired, and an absence of plausible alternative explanations for the achievement. The report also promotes test-driven accountability at the expense of the learning needs of pre-K-12 public school students. As such, it is ideologically and politically motivated and fails to provide valuable guidance for policy or add to the research base on closing achievement gaps or on diversity, equity, and inclusion in K-12 settings.



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I. Introduction

A growing body of evidence points to the increasing demographic diversity of the U.S. K-12 public school population,¹ and the cognitive and socioemotional benefits of diversity for students and institutions of all backgrounds.² This demographic diversity and the desire to better support students with non-dominant identities (e.g., race, gender, language, ability, LGBTQ+, neurodiversity) has led school districts across the U.S. to create the role of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO).

The CDO role emerged from the policies related to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including affirmative action and equal opportunity education.³ CDOs can be found in the administrative ranks of corporations, higher education institutions, professional organizations, and school districts. CDOs, as the highest ranking diversity administrators in organizations, have “assumed an increasingly vital role in fostering a more diverse and productive learning and work environment.”⁴ In K-12 and higher education settings, CDOs’ roles “are often fluid in nature and largely dependent on institutional resources, history, context, and culture as well as the nature and structure of the CDO position.”⁵ Like those in higher education, CDOs in K-12 school districts lead diversity offices; provide direction for diversity committees and training for faculty, staff, and administrators; help districts plan diversity initiatives; serve as compliance officers; and provide teachers guidance about building relationships with their students, implementing culturally sustaining curricula, developing inclusive assessment practices, and engaging with the community.⁶

In *Equity Elementary: “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” Staff in Public Schools*, Jay P. Greene and James D. Paul express concern that the trend of creating CDO positions in higher education has advanced to K-12 settings, is taking root there, and growing. Particularly, the report claims that CDOs hired by K-12 school districts ostensibly to close achievement

gaps may, instead, hinder the success of activism on the part of parents and teachers who are opposed to “teaching critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and other radical transformations of K-12 education.”⁷ This worry that CDOs’ work in public schools will hamper a conservative agenda frames the report’s examination of the distribution and efficacy of CDOs in U.S. K-12 public schools.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

In its exploration of the prevalence of CDOs in districts around the U.S., the report finds that while CDOs are increasing in number in K-12 education systems overall, they are more commonly found:

- in large districts in Democratic or “blue” states;
- in districts with more Black students, more students of two or more races, more English Learners (ELLs), and more students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (FRL); and
- in districts with more school resources (as measured by pupil-to-teacher ratio).

The report argues that “all things being equal, districts with CDOs should have smaller achievement gaps than districts that do not have CDOs.”⁸ And that “[t]he primary purpose of CDOs—according to most school district websites—is to help reduce achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.”⁹ It finds that employing CDOs leads to larger achievement gaps between White and Black students, between White and Hispanic students, and between wealthy and poor students. Using data from Stanford University’s Educational Opportunity Project,¹⁰ the report claims that “the existence of CDOs in school districts may actually exacerbate achievement gaps by implementing counterproductive interventions.”¹¹

The report concludes that, although CDO positions were created “ostensibly to close achievement gaps and advance certain goals,”¹² CDOs are “best understood as political activists who articulate and enforce ideological orthodoxy within school districts.”¹³ It recommends that state legislatures oversee hiring and evaluation of district CDOs, that school districts analyze whether hiring CDOs is associated with improved academic outcomes, and that parents should determine whether or not school boards should hire CDOs.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report states its concerns about the leftist activity of CDOs as stimulating the research conducted. This research examined 554 districts with each at least 15,000 students enrolled as of 2017.¹⁴ Based on online searches for the districts’ names with key terms (e.g., “diversity, equity, and inclusion”) and reviews of the districts’ websites, it labeled districts as “CDO” or “non-CDO” districts. It also labeled the districts as belonging to “blue” or “red” states based on the party dominant in the state’s governor’s office and state legislature, and classified districts based on their size. It then compared CDO and non-CDO districts on these factors,

finding more CDOs in large districts and in districts located in blue states. A follow-up regression controlling for the “racial composition of the district,” “measures of student need,” and “resources spent on students” found that a district’s size and its location in a blue or red state continued to be associated with whether or not it had a CDO.¹⁵ Noting that “Blue states are 17 percentage points more likely than red states to have CDOs, after adjusting for other observable characteristics,” the report concluded “that CDOs are designed, at least in part, to promote ideological goals.”¹⁶

The report’s second set of analyses is based on its claim that the primary purpose of hiring a CDO is to reduce achievement gaps. To do these analyses, the report merged its CDO/non-CDO variable with student test score data from the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University (EOPS). The analyses found greater differences in test scores (“achievement gaps”) based on race and student need in districts labeled “CDO” than in those labeled “non-CDO.” They also found a very small trend toward those gaps increasing over time. A regression analysis that controlled for district size, political dominance in the state, student need, and resources spent on students found that having a CDO continued to be “significantly and negatively related to both the level and change in white–black achievement gaps.”¹⁷

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report did not include nor refer to any existing research that could shed light on its claims.¹⁸ Several areas of literature are relevant. Although the research on CDOs in K-12 settings is scant, much has been written about the history and models of the role in corporate, professional organization, and higher education settings.¹⁹ This work indicates that CDOs are not all alike and that their roles are limited by the structure of their organization (i.e., their districts, in the case of K-12 CDOs).²⁰ For example, a “collaborative model” CDO serves in a one-person office with a small support staff, no reporting unit structure, a limited budget, and a narrow span of priorities. This type of CDO is rarely involved in diversity initiatives at ground level. A “unit-based CDO” supervises lower rank DEI officers and collaborates directly with diversity and non-diversity-related offices. A “portfolio divisional CDO” collaborates directly with high-ranking administrators, supervises lower ranking diversity officers, and has a direct relationship with reporting units.²¹

Thus, some CDOs supervise staff to develop and implement practice informed by attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). A vast research literature demonstrates positive student outcomes in K-12 settings when educators employ such practices.²² Teaching strategies such as asking students to participate in knowledge construction, fostering learning communities, and teaching through students’ cultural orientations and experiences have been linked with positive academic outcomes in reading, mathematics, science, and language arts.²³

Significantly, the report ignores research on the multiple factors impacting student outcomes that would have provided context within which to interpret any possible impact of CDOs on student achievement. Income segregation between school districts and the economic and social inequalities it creates have long been linked to differences in student achievement.²⁴

In fact, research using the same standardized testing performance data used in this report found that district socioeconomic status (SES) and race are the strongest explanatory predictors of student achievement between and within school districts.²⁵ Other predictors include teacher expectations, family structure, school environment, and stereotype threat.²⁶

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report uses elementary descriptive statistics and problematic multivariate statistical analyses as the basis for its findings. A significant flaw in its methodology is the poorly conceived variable that aims to distinguish between “CDO districts” and “non-CDO districts.” To determine if school districts employed CDOs, simple online searches were conducted for the terms “diversity, equity, and inclusion”; and staff, department, and organizational charts on public school districts’ websites were reviewed. Districts that employed CDOs at the time the research was conducted were categorized as “CDO districts” and those that did not were labeled “non-CDO districts.”²⁷ This method does not define CDOs’ roles either generally or in the respective districts, or consider whether any of the non-CDO districts employ administrators whose titles do not include the “key terms” but who do, in fact, do diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Nor does it consider why CDOs were hired or their differing roles and responsibilities across districts. All administrators with the word “diversity” in their titles do not necessarily do the same work, have the same responsibilities, or even have the same support of their district leaders.

It is possible that some districts hired CDOs to address equity-related issues other than achievement gaps.²⁸ But is also possible that CDO positions were created in districts where achievement gaps were high to begin with because of higher perceived need in those districts.²⁹ No data is reported on when districts created their CDO positions or the magnitude of achievement gaps when the positions were created.³⁰ By looking only at the distinction between districts with or without CDOs at a given point in time, the report makes inappropriate comparisons.

Another flaw is that the report presents percentages of districts with CDOs in groups based on their enrollment—greater than 100,000, 50,000-99,999, 30,000-49,999, 20,000-29,999, and 15,000-19,999—without explaining or citing research to justify reporting percentages by enrollment size.

To compare achievement gaps between “CDO districts” and “non-CDO districts,” the report uses standardized testing performance data from the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University (EOPS).³¹ It compares CDO districts and non-CDO districts to show unadjusted achievement gaps between White and Black students, White and Hispanic students, and non-poor and poor students. The EOPS website provides average test scores for math, reading, and language for Grades 3-8 students from 2009-2018 and trends in test scores to create an “educational opportunity metric.”³² Nowhere, however, does the current report explain which EOPS test-score data were merged with the school district variable included in the study.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Despite the lack of any evidence that CDOs are responsible for achievement test outcomes or consideration that CDOs have varying responsibilities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the report declares that a CDO's primary responsibility is to close the achievement gap on standardized testing outcomes. It uses this assertion as its rationale to run multivariate regression analyses to look for differences between CDO and non-CDO districts.³³ It claims that employing CDOs in a district increases the achievement gap between Black and White students, White and Hispanic students, and non-poor and poor students and that, conversely, non-CDO districts have smaller achievement gaps for those groups. By this logic, districts could simply remove their CDOs to shrink their achievement gaps.

However, the report's use of a poorly constructed variable ("CDO district"/"non-CDO district") in its analyses corrupts its findings.^{34,35} Further, the report compares achievement gaps based on data from the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University (EOPS), yet selectively presents outcome differences as districtwide phenomenon without indicating which EOPS data were used.³⁶ These flaws invalidate any causal assertions based on the regression conducted. Even without these flaws, the report's findings of growth in achievement gaps from 2009-2018 are miniscule, ranging from .01 to .03—and therefore not meaningful.³⁷

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report claims to analyze the effectiveness of CDOs but fails to do so. Instead, it is an ideological report with significant methodological flaws. It ignores the history, role, and models of CDOs,³⁸ and—even more significantly—the research literature on how standardized testing outcomes are impacted by racial and socioeconomic inequality and discrepancies in household adult education attainment.³⁹ It uses inaccurate variables in its statistical analyses, makes causal assertions that are untenable, and then makes sweeping policy recommendations based on the flawed research. As such, it is not at all useful as a guide for policy and practice.

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