

# THE BAT-SIGNAL FOR EQUITY

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Illinois Educators on  
Strengthening the Equity  
Journey Continuum



# INTRODUCTION

Equity has been a focus in education for years, but because equity can often mean different things to different people, working toward equity presents complex challenges for school leaders. In 2022, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) added a new item to district report cards called the Equity Journey

Continuum (EJC), which serves as “an informational tool to help districts view their data through the lens of equity [that] identifies gaps in student achievement, opportunities, and supports by analyzing data that districts already collect and report to ISBE.”<sup>1</sup>

The EJC uses step-like scales to display a district’s progress in each of three broad goals of ISBE’s strategic plan: student learning, learning conditions, and elevating educators.<sup>2</sup> The tool indicates whether a district has large, moderate, small, or minimal gaps in equity for each goal. The state has taken a position of urgency when it comes to closing these gaps, asserting the “collective responsibility to achieve educational equity by ensuring that all policies, programs, and practices affirm the strengths that each and every child brings within their diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and by delivering the comprehensive supports, programs, and educational opportunities they need to succeed.”<sup>3</sup>

As Teach Plus Illinois Policy Fellows and educators who teach across the state and grade levels, we believe in the power of the EJC to guide school systems forward in their equity journeys. In this brief, we set out to learn how this new tool was being received and understood by educators. Though the goal of the EJC may be to affect system and culture-level changes for all students, we recognized that there could be disparities between a districts’ data-based rating and the lived experiences of educators.

Below, we present our findings and recommendations for policymakers on meaningful improvements to the EJC so that it more genuinely and intentionally reflects the lived experiences of teachers working in their respective districts. With our findings and recommendations, we hope to highlight areas of improvement that can make the EJC an even more effective driver of equity work in Illinois schools.

## Findings

1. Teacher ratings of “Student Learning” aligned closely with the published EJC ratings.
2. Teacher ratings of “Elevating Educators” diverged from the published EJC ratings.
3. Teachers lack understanding about the EJC.
4. Teachers recognize districts are working to close equity gaps and want more resources to do so.

## Recommendations

1. Revise the Elevating Educators component.
2. Include teacher perspectives in the EJC’s equity narratives.
3. Conduct comprehensive outreach to stakeholders about the EJC.

## METHODOLOGY

We conducted live focus groups in spring 2023. Educators from across Illinois were introduced to the EJC, its components, and their own districts' scores. Focus group conversations centered around educators' first impressions of the EJC and comparisons between their experiences and their districts' ratings. We sought to learn whether the state's reporting of a district's scores on their respective EJC was reflective of the lived experiences of educators.

We designed focus groups to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the educators to better understand their lived experiences in relation to the EJC scores. We interviewed 31 educators across a variety of classroom experience levels, regions of the state, and grade levels and subjects taught, with the following demographic markers:

- + Educators taught in 16 school districts across Illinois
- + Three had fewer than 4 years of teaching experience, nine had 4-9 years of teaching experience, nine had 10-15 years of teaching experience, and ten had 10+years of teaching experience
- + Nineteen identified as White/Caucasian, six identified as Hispanic or Latinx, four identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, four identified as Black or African American, and one identified as Other.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Teacher ratings of “Student Learning” aligned closely with the published EJC ratings.

The category of “Student Learning” was where the largest group of teachers in the focus group offered the same rating as the published results. One teacher spoke to the *“safe environment”* their district created to develop a strong sense of student learning, echoed by another who felt students had *“access to technology, which is required for learning.”* One respondent felt their district demonstrated *“efforts to close resource gaps where possible,”* while another participant believed *“student learning is the most equitable”* because *“students [made] significant academic gains that prepare them for after graduation.”* Finally, one educator felt student learning was a district strength because teachers were all successfully working with *“the same curriculum with the same resources.”*

We believe an important reason why teacher and EJC ratings were aligned in this area is that the Student Learning metric in the EJC uses student performance data such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, 8th graders enrolled in Algebra classes, and *“equitable access to high quality and rigorous curricula,”* all of which, in our experience, are generally accessible to teachers. With greater firsthand knowledge of the data in this area, it is unsurprising that teachers' lived experiences with student learning match the same conclusions evident in the data.

## 2. Teacher ratings of “Elevating Educators” diverged from the published EJC ratings.

The majority of respondents rated their districts either slightly less or much less equitable than published ratings in the category of “Elevating Educators.” The Elevating Educator component in the EJC is measured through district educator and administrator demographics, reflecting “educators who are prepared through multiple pathways and are supported in and recognized for their efforts to provide each and every child an education that meets their needs.”

Focus group respondents rated their experience of “Elevating Educators” as least equitable in large part because they saw the “Elevating Educators” rating in different terms than EJC metrics. One respondent believed that the definition used for the “Elevating Educators” rating fails to capture what equity looks like for educators:

*“The elevating educators definition feels too broad when speaking about ‘multiple pathways.’ I’m not sure what this is specifically referring [to] in terms of promoting educators to continue in their own personal equity journeys.”*

Another respondent suggested that demographic data alone does not effectively communicate the need for *“diverse educators who represent the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the students they serve.”* One respondent forcefully spoke to how equity requires more than what is offered in the EJC: *“I think that framework puts the onus of the inequity on students, teachers, and resources, without addressing the policies and practices that the United States and Illinois educational system and district’s own policies and practices which advantage some and disadvantage others. This looks like dismantling inequity through the students, teachers, and resources having the sole responsibility without looking inward to what is broken in the system.”*

Participating teachers indicated that the disconnect between teachers’ experiences and EJC rating dampened enthusiasm towards the EJC as a whole: *“I think this tool needs some clarification on how the scores are determined and then a more clear comparison component.”* One respondent felt the disconnect contributed to their belief of the EJC ensuring districts were *“looking good on paper vs lived realities.”*

This disconnect is particularly unsettling for teachers of color. The gulf between *“looking good on paper”* and personal experience is a burden for educators of color, demanding

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their conformity to an impossibly high standard which denies their experiences. This underrepresentation of the voices of teachers of color is an important reason why retention of teachers of color, particularly Black teachers, continues to be a challenge for schools. Research affirms that “Black teachers struggle with feeling hindered professionally, undervalued and unappreciated in workplaces that ask them to stifle their personalities and hold back their opinions.”<sup>4</sup> Teachers of color must live a life of illusion: they know things are not good or can

be better. Yet, they are surrounded with the conditions of a manufactured reality telling them otherwise. The disconnect in the Elevating Educators component shows how the EJC might regrettably become another tool that fails to capture the full experiences of teachers of color.

### 3. Teachers lack understanding about the EJC.

When asked, “How well do you think this tool [The EJC] reports on equity?” focus group respondents showed a lack of understanding of the tool itself. One respondent confirmed this with, *“To be honest, I found the website confusing and difficult to get an exact answer.”* Other respondents simply stated, *“I am not sure how the tool works,”* or had *“trouble understanding the meaning behind this tool and what are behind the metrics,”* or felt the EJC featured *“very confusing and nebulous terms used. Seems like word salad.”*

Beyond general confusion, focus group respondents specifically noted an absence of their perspectives included in the EJC results or skepticism about the data used to generate the tool. One participant explained:

*“If my lived experiences are not in some way displayed by this tool, then I’m very curious what metrics or data they are using to inform the continuum.”*

Another respondent felt the EJC was *“broad and not sure how these perspectives are gathered and when,”* while another participant *“could not tell where the information comes from,”* and another asserting the EJC consists of *“buzzwords”* that *“sound lovely.”* Teachers may feel misled by or disconnected from the EJC if they lack familiarity with it, don’t understand how it is generated, or aren’t aware of how it’s meant to be used.

### 4. Teachers recognize districts are working to close equity gaps and want more resources to do so.

Many focus group respondents felt that the work of closing equity gaps too often fell on teachers’ shoulders. They felt challenged in trying to create equitable experiences for their students on their own, despite going above and beyond their job descriptions, and said they needed more help. One teacher called for *“training across the board”* on initiatives in place in their district, while several felt *“overworked and stretched”* as they worked to meet student needs in the face of teacher shortages and a *“lack of resources [materials and staff]”* depriving *“the most needy students in the school.”* These inequities have the greatest impact on traditionally underserved students, who too often attend schools with the fewest resources. One focus group participant acknowledged their district’s work in minimizing equity disparities, but also felt their own current reality begs for more support:

*“COVID has really hindered the learning of our students and we have been playing catch up to try to figure out how to fix this learning gap. Our district is doing more than most, but we still need more.”*

While teachers share ISBE’s sense of urgency when it comes to closing equity gaps, their efforts can come at a high price. One participant pointed out that *“teacher burnout is high and students are left without their needs being met when so much work is being asked from teachers to close equity gaps.”* A respondent similarly described working

outside of school hours without compensation or recognition: “...*Teachers do a lot of work outside of school hours which should be recognized. I also think that teachers do the best they can with the training that has been provided.*” [Research confirms](#) how such experiences contribute to teacher stress, burnout, and eventual departure from the profession.<sup>5</sup> Teachers in the focus groups wanted support, training, and compensation both from districts and for districts to continue meaningful work to positively impact all of their students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Revise the Elevating Educators component.

Revising the calculations in the Elevating Educators component can help address the gap between the EJC and teachers' experiences. The Elevating Educators metrics currently include demographic comparisons of student-to-teacher and student-to-administrator diversity, which we believe are important. However, the demographic breakdown of a district is not enough. The lived experiences of teachers of color should also be represented with metrics that show whether teachers feel safe, welcomed, and elevated. One currently available metric that we recommend including in this calculation is the retention of teachers of color. Retention rates among teachers of color have been significantly lower than those of their White colleagues across Illinois.<sup>6</sup> Including these rates in the calculation will both better illustrate whether districts are places teachers of color want to work and encourage districts to give more attention to the needs of these teachers.

We believe the remaining three indicators, broadly measuring teacher qualifications, are unlikely to offer valuable insight into the practical experiences of either educators or students when it comes to equity, because the ability to hire and retain a highly qualified staff is more closely related to district funding than factors educators experience directly or have control over. To illustrate this, consider a hypothetical wealthy, predominately White suburban district. This hypothetical district might use its greater-than-adequate funding to hire a predominately White staff with impeccable credentials, resulting in high scores in both the demographic-match and teacher-qualification indicators. Yet this would not require the district to do anything to promote equity intentionally or to make teachers from other backgrounds feel welcome. In fact, leveraging resources in this way may make the education system as a whole less equitable even as the wealthy students in this district are better served, and an EJC rating of “minimal gaps” might make the district even less likely to pursue strategies to diversify its faculty.

“Elevating educators” must mean elevating all educators, and the EJC metrics must include a diversity lens to promote movement toward a teaching profession that reflects Illinois' diverse student population. We recommend including measures that reflect teachers' perceptions of their own experiences. For example, existing metrics from the 5 Essentials survey might be useful to incorporate. As the EJC continues to evolve, it may eventually be preferable to develop a new tool specifically geared toward understanding the lived experiences of stakeholders, when it comes to equity.

## 2. Include teacher perspectives in the equity narratives.

Whether created jointly with district leadership or independently, the inclusion of teacher experience in the district narrative on equity would provide a more complete picture of the work towards equitable experiences for students and teachers. It would also prevent districts from painting a rosy picture in words without follow through.

Addressing the disconnect from the data noted by a number of teachers, several also indicated a willingness to support the EJC if their experiences were included in their district's journey towards equitable experiences for all:

*"I think that the tool misses a lot of the diversity that is represented in the district. This is an overview and provides quantitative data. However, the qualitative, narrative information is sometimes more valuable to realize the need for change."*

We believe inclusion of teacher voices in the construction of equity narratives could reduce this perceived isolation. Accordingly, we recommend ISBE include teacher voices in the development of EJC district equity narratives. This might mean creating space to offer a teacher-developed narrative in addition to that offered by district leaders, or requiring both district administration and teacher representatives to endorse the single public narrative. While any inclusion of teacher voice would be an improvement, we prefer a collaborative approach, because it would encourage better understanding of multiple perspectives and joint commitment and cooperation among all stakeholders. Eventually, the EJC narrative might also evolve to include the perspectives of students, parents, and community stakeholders as well to further encourage understanding and collaboration.

## 3. Conduct comprehensive outreach to stakeholders about the EJC.

Because it was clear that the educators we spoke to were unfamiliar with the EJC and generally confused even after being introduced to the tool, we recommend that ISBE conduct broad and ongoing outreach efforts to inform the public. This can be most efficiently done via practicing educators, who will in turn be able to explain the tool to families and colleagues.

Outreach should include workshops and webinars to help teachers better understand the EJC, including condensed and asynchronous learning options. To incentivize participation, ISBE should consider offering professional development credit for participation, or even compensation for teachers who agree to take on an active role in educating colleagues.

In addition, there should be easily accessible links to these resources on the EJC portion of district report cards to provide just-in-time learning to those who have questions while viewing the tool. Many of the questions raised by focus group participants, particularly about the data used to create the tool, could be easily and immediately addressed by linking to information already available on the ISBE website.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers understand the importance of working toward equity to change their students' lives. Our respondents, and the authors of this report, recognize that the EJC is an important tool to shine a light on the path towards more equitable student learning experiences. By better aligning metrics with teachers' lived experiences, authentically including teacher voices, and amplifying communication about the EJC, ISBE can do more to encourage districts and teachers on that journey. Our findings revealed the depths to which teachers waded through the challenging waters of equity with their students. In choppy waters, beacons of light are necessary, and we believe the EJC could be one such lantern.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. [teachplus.org](https://teachplus.org)



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## ENDNOTES

1 Introducing the Equity Journey Continuum. Illinois State Board of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Equity-Journey-Continuum-5Ws.aspx>

2 Ibid.

3 Equity Information and Resources. Illinois State Board of Education. Retrieved from: <https://isbe.net/equity>

4 “Recruitment and Retention of Black Educators: Promising strategies at eight U.S. teacher residencies” by Naureen Madhani, Ph.D. Robert Shand, Ph.D. Kimberly Austin, Ph.D. <https://nctresidencies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Recruitment-and-Retention-of-Black-Educators-Full-Report-FINAL-July-2022.pdf>

5 “Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes” by Keith C. Herman, PhD , Jal’et Hickmon-Rosa, BA , and Wendy M. Reinke, PhD. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1173521.pdf>

6 “Illinois leaders making new efforts to recruit and retain Black teachers” <https://khqa.com/newsletter-daily/illinois-leaders-making-new-efforts-to-recruit-and-retain-black-teachers>