

Racial Equity Report:

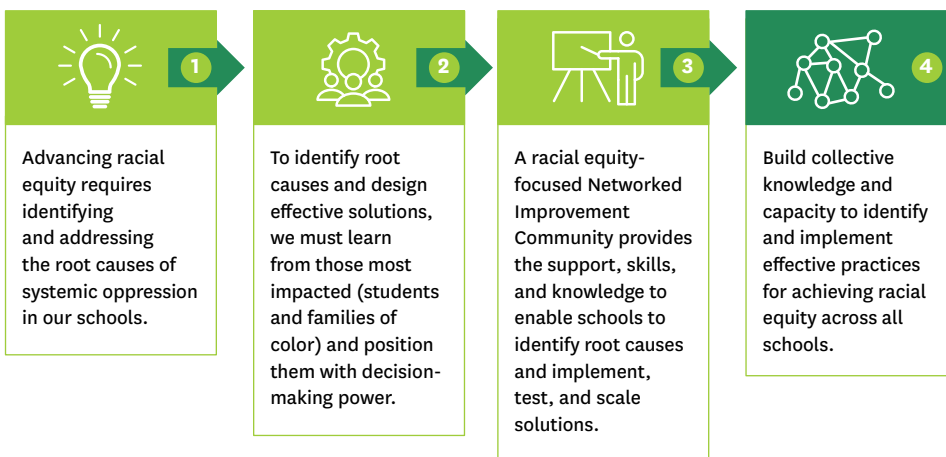
Orienting Networked Improvement Communities for Equity

Introduction

EdVestors launched the Racial Equity Networked Improvement Community (NIC) in 2021 as a Research Practice Partnership with Boston Public Schools (BPS) Office of Opportunity Gaps and Boston University researchers to build the capacity of Boston schools to understand, implement, and shape conditions that disrupt and dismantle racial inequities in school systems. This brief examines how the Research Practice Partnership (RPP) members co-facilitated and adapted a Networked Improvement Community Model with an equity lens to achieve this aim.

This Racial Equity NIC consisted of the RPP members alongside a cohort of school leaders, educators, students, families, and other school improvement nonprofits working collaboratively to identify and address root causes of racial inequities using equity-centered improvement science processes. The theory of improvement undergirding this Racial Equity NIC is that if school community members most directly impacted by systemic racial inequities are active decision-makers and authentically engaged in school improvement work, then schools are more likely to identify true causes of the inequity and develop effective solutions for reducing race-based gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes for Boston youth.

Theory of Improvement:



Timeframe: 2021–2023

2 years

Grades served

Pre-K - 12

Networked Improvement Community (NIC) Members:

3 partners

- EdVestors
- Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development
- Boston Public Schools Office of Opportunity Gaps

School and Organization Cohort Members:

Cohort 1: 2021- 2023

- 9 Schools
- 6 Community Organizations

Cohort 2: 2022- 2023

- 7 Schools
- 4 Community Organizations

Background

Research-practice partnerships (RPP) are long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations between practitioners and researchers that examine problems of practice and solutions for improving schools and districts (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). RPPs have the potential to identify and combat root causes of systemic race-based inequities within local school systems when *intentionally* designed to confront educational inequities and challenge oppressive research processes (Diamond, 2021).

Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) are one type of RPP with four core characteristics. NICs are 1) focused on a well-specified aim, 2) guided by a deep understanding of the problem and the system that produced it, 3) use improvement science methods to develop, test, and refine innovative practice, and 4) organized to accelerate learning about tested practices within and beyond the network (Bryk et al., 2015). For RPPs operating as NICs, improvement science principles and protocols are the activities around which researchers and practitioners collaborate as they work towards shared goals (Bryk et al., 2015).

Scholars have argued that improvement science and RPPs can reinforce or reproduce inequities (Diamond, 2021; Dugan & Safir, 2021; Vetter et al., 2022). Studies of RPPs, including NICs, overwhelmingly do not explicitly address equity in identifying and dismantling inequitable educational practices for racialized minorities or provide clearly defined terms when equity is mentioned (Vetter et al., 2022). In addition, little scholarship has delved into how members of school communities most impacted by racial inequities – especially students and families – can meaningfully engage in improvement science processes.

To conceptualize how NICs can center community in school improvement work in efforts to address inequities, we outlined a novel NIC for Equity model that was co-designed and co-facilitated across the first two years of iteration with RPP members and cohort members.

We explicitly conceptualize racial equity in school improvement work as twofold:



Ensuring all students have transparent access to and equitable uptake of learning opportunities regardless of racial background.



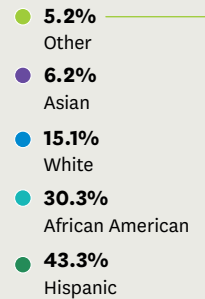
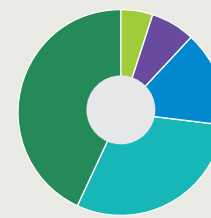
Authentically engaging diverse community members (e.g., school staff, parents and caretakers, and students) in school improvement decision-making who have been historically marginalized in school systems, particularly students, families, and staff members of color.



We specifically ask: How can the NIC model be adapted to focus on dismantling racist and unjust school practices and policies through authentic community engagement?

Cohort 1 Students: 2021-2023

Race/Ethnicity



Average %

19.8%
Students with Disabilities

32%
English Language Learners

64.7%
Economically Disadvantaged

Other Race/Ethnicity

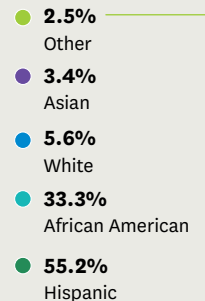
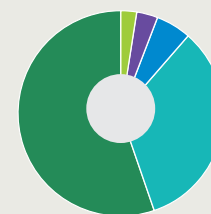
0.1%
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

0.3%
Native American

4.8%
Multi-Race

Cohort 2 Students: 2022-2023

Race/Ethnicity



Average %

19.1%
Students with Disabilities

42%
English Language Learners

81%
Economically Disadvantaged

Other Race/Ethnicity

0.4%
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

0.1%
Native American

2%
Multi-Race

Description of Study

To understand how equity-focused improvement questions manifested into a NIC for Equity, we drew upon de-identified secondary data compiled by EdVestors across NIC activities for the first two cohorts of the Racial Equity NIC in 2021-2022 and 2022-23, including convening materials (e.g., PowerPoints, agendas, notes), post-convening surveys given to NIC participants, mid-year focus group notes conducted with each participating organization, templates that teams filled out to document various stages of the improvement process, and internal presentations.

These documents were analyzed to generate themes around how equitable relationships were seen in collaborative NIC governance across Edvestors, BPS, and BU and the processes for supporting *equitable systems* for improvement, all of which served as a model of a NIC for Equity. *Equitable relationships* focused on how the NIC addressed historical power imbalances between researcher and practitioner communities (Henrick et al., 2019). Processes for supporting *equitable systems* entailed how RPP and NIC members “work together for shared goals, remove barriers that limit progress, and build capacity for individuals and organizations to better collaborate” (Henrick et al., 2019).

Initial Findings: How to Infuse Equity into NIC Relationships and Processes

Equitable Relationships

1 A collaborative NIC governance structure was critical to ensure shared accountability for the work. The three organizations each held a unique role based on experience and expertise while actively engaging in joint work. The partners held weekly standing hour-long Zoom meetings to keep collaborative work on track. A core group of three representatives from each partner organization consistently attended and jointly constructed the agenda. The governance team sought to model an improvement mindset in continuously collecting “just-in-time” data from NIC members, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations to adjust support strategies and the cadence of the work in response to the individual needs of member schools and organizations. Partners also exhibited a set of shared dispositions of mutual respect, trust, and belief in the potential transformative power of improvement science to address inequities in education.

2 Schools and community organizations were encouraged to exercise autonomy and use provided but adaptable structures and strategies that increased shared decision-making with students and families. Schools and organizations decided who attended NIC convenings, who participated in site-based improvement work, and where this work lived, utilizing different spaces, meeting structures, and relational-building strategies to bring staff, families, and students from historically marginalized backgrounds together. Site-based improvement teams were encouraged to challenge traditional roles within improvement teams, with explicit encouragement to jointly decide what data to collect, analyze data, and make decisions with community members. Per the Racial Equity NIC grant requirements, families and students had to be equitably compensated for their time, and schools and organizations were asked for evidence that they engaged in collaborative decision-making with students and families to allocate the grant money.

In post-convening surveys, focus groups, and end-of-the-year reflections, NIC members made comments such as —

“As someone who is not directly impacted by this work, we must follow the lead of students and ensure that we are not presenting something that is for them, without their partnership from the very beginning.”

“Students ended up making the final decisions... they decided how to use the funds... and were the drivers of our initiatives.”

Initial Findings

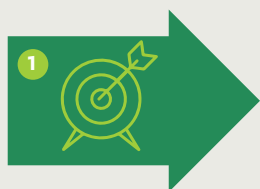
Equitable Systems

3 Engaging community members in improvement science activities shifted the mindsets of NIC members around who holds expertise and who should be involved in school-based and organization-based decisions. The RPP partners guided NIC members to engage community members, including students and families, across all stages of improvement work, with equity embedded across the four core characteristics of NICs (Bryk et al., 2015). First, the NIC clearly defined racial equity and focused on a well-specified aim that directly addressed context-specific racial inequities. Second, the NIC was guided by a deep understanding of the problem and the system that produced it through intensive root cause analyses focused on street-level data centering the voices of historically marginalized students and families. NIC members were taught to identify root causes by analyzing multiple forms of data that capture the voices, lived experiences, and perspectives of historically and currently marginalized students, families, and staff. We gleaned from focus group data and observations that leaning into street data was a valuable resource for leveraging community voice in the process. Once root cause analyses were completed and aim statements developed, the NIC coached schools to use improvement science methods to develop, test, and refine innovative practices *in conjunction with students, parents, and community members.*

4 Organizing the NIC to accelerate learning within and beyond the network in non-hierarchical and inclusive ways created opportunities for cross-school learning. Participant expectations for the cohort included “share learning, best practices, and openly discuss challenges.” Convenings balanced whole and small group sharing, providing opportunities to swap feedback and share ideas with other schools and organizations. The final convening each year allowed all teams to share the work they had accomplished as part of the cohort, celebrate successes, offer feedback to one another, and generate ideas from others’ presentations. In surveys and focus groups, NIC members repeatedly expressed the value of having opportunities for cross-school and cross-organization learning and sharing ideas alongside their impact in generating strategies and practices for reducing racial inequities within their community contexts.

“The process of collecting street data and engaging in focus groups with students led to increases in student belonging. The process became an outcome within itself.”

Networked Improvement Community for Equity



1 Identify Problem of Practice
Identify a racial equity problem a school community is experiencing.



2 Conduct Root Cause Analysis
Develop a deep understanding of the problem by prioritizing learning from the lived experiences of students and families through “street data” collection.



3 Develop and Test Practices
School community members identify solutions to address the root causes of inequities and test and refine them.



4 Accelerate and Share Learning
School community members share learnings, progress, and successes among each other.

Successes and Challenges

Engagement of Students and Families: Engaging students and families proved to be both a success and a challenge. NIC members effectively increased student and family participation on improvement teams and utilized different strategies to include perspectives from different community members. Students and families shared leadership and decision-making power with school staff, co-developed solutions together, and frequently influenced shifts in school-based practices. While NIC members consistently reported that they believed in the importance of involving families reflecting the racial demographics of the community in racial equity school improvement work, NIC members also identified challenges in bringing diverse families into the work and sustaining their involvement. This included school and organization staff not knowing the best mediums to communicate with families, families not attending meetings or events, lack of diversity of family participants, and limited family participation in street data collection. This suggests that it will take time and new ways of engaging together to build trust and relationships among families to feel comfortable engaging in improvement science activities.

Successes

Flexibility and Adaptability: Being able and willing to adapt NIC processes, including cadence, support strategies, and structures was integral for the governance team and for NIC members bringing improvement work into their schools.

Emphasizing Street Data: The widespread focus on collecting and interpreting street data across cohort schools signified a shift in how NIC members considered who holds expertise in identifying why inequities exist within their schools or organizations and what their schools or organizations should do about it. Specifically, NIC members recognized student and parent expertise in collecting street data and provided examples of how they turned to students as collaborators, decision-makers, and drivers of change.

Alignment to District Priorities: NIC activities were explicitly aligned to district initiatives and priorities. Examples included utilizing shared language, leveraging existing school team structures encouraged by the district as the space for improvement science teams to work, and strategically using data schools were already required to collect with additional street data to inform root causes and assess impact.

Challenges

Building More Community Across NIC Cohort Members: NIC members indicated they wanted more opportunities for community building and cross-organizational collaboration. Participants shared resounding feedback that having thought partners and the ability to hear from other schools encouraged new ideas and helped them move their work forward. Examples of suggestions from NIC members included more community-building activities, opportunities to elicit feedback from other schools, and visiting other schools.

Gaining Confidence in Improvement Science Processes: Some NIC members expressed feeling overwhelmed or not confident in going through the improvement science process or found the iterative and sometimes ambiguous nature of the improvement science processes challenging. While NIC members reported using the improvement tools that had been provided in the convenings and appreciating access to ongoing technical support from EdVestors, they also described the improvement science process as “heavy,” “fast-moving,” and “like a university course.” Relatedly, NIC members more frequently reported engaging in defining a problem of practice, identifying root causes, and taking actions, but not always connecting the actions taken to the root cause analysis or collecting data on their actions using practical measures.

Time Constraints and Leadership Transitions: Challenges of finding time to implement new initiatives in K-12 school systems included the difficulty of finding a time for the convenings themselves that all NIC members could attend and engage in. Individual school teams also lacked time to engage in the work independently, particularly as schools were focused on transitioning back to in-person instruction and tackling multiple challenges pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the first two years, changes in leadership at schools in the first cohort and a change in leadership of the district superintendent posed challenges to sustainability and continuity.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Research-practice partnerships, when intentionally designed, have the potential to address systemic inequities within schools. This NIC for Equity model provides a valuable framework for how such partnerships can be operationalized within an urban school district. Central to this model is authentic community engagement embedded within the governance structure and the improvement science processes and practices NIC members implemented. Over the next two years, we will empirically test this model to examine whether NICs that build school capacity to engage students and families in improvement work can generate equitable educational experiences and outcomes based on students' race and other intersecting identities. As such, we encourage others to continue to apply, test, and refine this model within the contexts of their unique communities.

For a full copy of the report, please email Ariel Tichnor-Wagner at arieltw@bu.edu.

End Notes

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“One of the things I appreciate about this cohort work is level of intentionality that was required of us. In our work, things move really fast. Once we got our problem of practice drafted, we were pushed to step back and ask ‘but wait why does this problem exist?’ This work required us to take a step back and analyze what our vision is, what it is going to take for us to get there, and how do we directly involve stakeholders most impacted.”

“Young people know their school community better than anyone - listen to them. They have ideas and, with support, the leadership skills to make an impact on their own community.”



Authors and Partners

EdVestors

Ruth Mercado-Zizzo, Vice President, Programs and Equity

Alia Verner, Director of Equitable Improvement

Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development

Dr. Hardin Coleman, Professor and Dean Emeritus

Dr. Ariel Tichnor-Wagner, Lecturer and Program Director

Boston Public Schools

Dr. Yozmin Gay, Assistant Superintendent of Office of Opportunity Gaps

Donna Lashus, Director of Culturally Sustaining Linguistic Practices

Velesia Saunders, Executive Director of Immigrant and Targeted Programming

About EdVestors

EdVestors' mission is to advance equitable, meaningful education that prepares every Boston student to activate their power and shape their future. We drive toward our vision by 1) activating people and resources, 2) learning and iterating in context, and 3) influencing system change. We believe that continuously attending to all three drivers ensures our programs and initiatives will create impact.

The Racial Equity Networked Improvement Community (NIC), launched in 2021 in conjunction with Boston University and Boston Public Schools, is an action-based learning community that aims to build the capacity of Boston to understand, implement, and shape conditions that disrupt and dismantle racial inequities.

Acknowledgements

The Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development Gordon Marshall Fellowship Award partially funded the writing of this paper. The authors would like to acknowledge Kristal Castro, Cyrus Konstantinacos, Kierstyn Kahler, and Rohan Arcot for their significant contributions to this work. We also express our deepest gratitude to the school, district, and nonprofit leaders, educators, students, and families who participated and were critical collaborators throughout this project. Their feedback, insights, and daily dedication to advancing equity in our education system have been invaluable. Finally, we would like to thank EdVestors staff and supporters for their essential thought partnerships and support of the Racial Equity Networked Improvement Community.

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For more information about our Racial Equity Networked Improvement Community:

Alia Verner (verner@edvestors.org) or Ariel Tichnor-Wagner (arieltw@bu.edu)

edvestors.org/initiatives/racial-equity