



An Equity Toolkit for Promise Neighborhoods

Advancing Equitable Outcomes through the Performance Management Cycle

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This brief provides Promise Neighborhoods and similar initiatives a framework for closing disparities in outcomes and achieving better results. The framework aligns with the Promise Neighborhoods performance management cycle: (1) assess needs, (2) establish measurable results and indicators, (3) deliver an evidence-based cradle-to-college continuum of solutions, and (4) monitor performance and repeat the cycle to pursue continuous improvement. Within this framework, we introduce concepts such as data segmentation, cocreation, and targeted universalism to help leaders bring a more powerful equity lens to planning and implementing initiatives focused on improving social and educational outcomes for all students. We also highlight key leverage points created by the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and state ESSA plans for Promise Neighborhoods to advance equitable outcomes for all students and families.

Promise Neighborhoods is a federal initiative that aims to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and families in diverse communities, including urban neighborhoods, rural areas, and tribal lands. Promise Neighborhood grantees are lead organizations that leverage grant funds administered by the US Department of Education with other resources to bring together schools, community residents, and other partners to plan and implement strategies to ensure children have the academic, family, and community supports they need to succeed in college and a career. Promise Neighborhoods are expected to target their efforts to the children and families who need them most as they confront complex issues such as struggling schools, high unemployment, poor housing, persistent crime, and other problems often found in underresourced neighborhoods.¹

This brief describes how Promise Neighborhoods can apply an equity lens to address disparate outcomes as a path to achieving better results for all children and families. Effective Promise Neighborhoods follow a performance management cycle—that is, steps to align services with the needs of individuals and families and to track and improve progress and results. Within these cycles are critical opportunities to address disparities. We review each step in the performance management cycle (figure 1) and discuss equity-focused tools and approaches embedded in each step to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. In the final section, we summarize some of the opportunities created by ESSA and how Promise Neighborhoods can use their state ESSA plan to align partners and resources with an equity lens.

FIGURE 1
Promise Neighborhood Performance Management Cycle



Source: Mary Bogle, Sarah Gillespie, and Christopher R. Hayes, *Continually Improving Promise Neighborhoods: The Role of Case Management Data* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015).

Step 1. Assess Needs and Conduct a Segmentation Analysis

For comprehensive initiatives like Promise Neighborhoods, the performance management cycle always begins with a needs assessment of the children and families who live in the neighborhood, as well as a segmentation analysis that identifies the needs of specific population subgroups. The needs assessment provides Promise Neighborhoods the data they need to set goals that address the root causes of poor outcomes among students and families in the neighborhood. The segmentation analysis provides data

that are crucial to addressing disparities among students (see box 1 for a discussion of key terms). Segmentation analysis prioritizes data disaggregation to identify disparities and subpopulations that are most in need to allow for tailored and differentiated supports (Comey et al. 2013). Segmentation analysis may disaggregate data by demographics (e.g., age, ethnicity, or gender), geography (e.g., neighborhood or school district), or other characteristics of interest (e.g., English language proficiency or marital status of head of household). Needs assessments are most effective when they strive to not only identify and describe need but include an analysis of factors that either contribute to the need or could mitigate the need. To avoid generalities, the needs assessment should go beyond administrative data to engage with community members and relevant stakeholders.

The disparate use of discipline in schools, even at the preschool level, is a useful example of an area where an equity lens focused on various groups and geographies can break down barriers to learning. According to the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2014), black children represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but they make up 48 percent of the preschool children who receive more than one out-of-school suspension each year. In contrast, white children make up 43 percent of preschool enrollment but only 26 percent of suspensions each year. Similar discipline patterns, which skew by race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, are observable throughout the K–12 continuum and worsen on an intersectional basis across these categories (i.e., children of color with disabilities experience harsher discipline than other children at disproportionate rates).

Promise Neighborhoods can use the needs assessment to identify local trends and compare them with regional or national trends. As we discuss in step 2, it is important to engage stakeholders such as teachers and community members to examine the factors that lead to disparate outcomes. Skipping this step and relying on broad conclusions about the causes of such disparities risks misdiagnosis of the problem. Table 1 provides questions Promise Neighborhoods might consider to apply a sharper equity lens to the information collected during the needs assessment and segmentation analysis. The Multnomah County Office of Diversity and Equity created these questions and organized them into four categories: people, place, process, and power.

BOX 1

Defining Equity, Equality, and Disparity

Equity is the quality of being just or fair. *Inequity* is its antecedent and is the quality of being unjust or unfair. In education (and other sectors), inequity is often used interchangeably with inequality, but they are different concepts.

Equality refers to the condition of being equal or similar and tends to relate to things that can be expressed numerically (e.g., the same amount of a resource distributed across groups). *Inequality* is the antecedent and refers to amounts being different across people or groups.^a Per the online Glossary of Education Reform, “equity encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair, but not necessarily equal. It has been said that ‘equity is the process; equality is the outcome,’ given that equity—what is fair and just—may not, in the process of educating students, reflect strict equality—what is applied, allocated, or distributed equally.”^b

Disparity connotes the quantity that separates a group from a reference point on a particular measure [of equality] in terms of a rate, proportion, mean, or some other quantitative measure.^c Typically, disparity is used to express the gap between groups such as in measures of educational achievement or health (e.g., black men are 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease and 60 percent more likely to die from a stroke than are non-Hispanic white men) that can often be the result of inequitable processes.^d

Defining terms like these up front in Promise Neighborhoods matters because experts and the public often define disparities in educational outcomes differently. “‘The Whole Socioeconomic Trickle-Down’: Mapping the Gaps on Disparities in Education,” a report from the FrameWorks Institute, offers insights about how concepts such as equity, equality, and disparity are defined by different groups and how to find common ground across groups.^e

^a“Inequality vs. Inequity,” Grammarist, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://grammarist.com/usage/inequality-inequity/>.

^b“Equity,” Glossary of Education Reform, last updated April 21, 2016, <https://www.edglossary.org/equity/>.

^cNational Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), *Healthy People 2010 Final Review* (Hyattsville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NCHS).

^dGarth Graham and J. Nadine Gracia, “Health Disparities in Boys in Men,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, suppl. 2 (May 2012): S167.

^eMichael Baran, Eric Lindland, Abigail Haydon, and Nat Kendall-Taylor, “‘The Whole Socioeconomic Trickle-Down’: Mapping the Gaps on Disparities in Education” (Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2013).

TABLE 1

Reflective Questions on Needs and Barriers

People	Place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who is positively and negatively affected by this issue and how? How are people differently situated in terms of the barriers they experience? Are people traumatized or retraumatized by your issue or decision area? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you, your issue, or decision account for people's emotional and physical safety and their need to be productive and feel valued? How are you considering environmental impacts and environmental justice? How are public resources and investments distributed geographically?
Process	Power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How meaningfully do you include or exclude people (e.g., communities of color) who are affected? What policies, processes, and social relationships contribute to the exclusion of communities most affected by inequities? Are there empowering processes at every human touchpoint? What processes are traumatizing, and how do we improve them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the barriers to doing equity work? What are the benefits and burdens that communities experience with this issue? Who is accountable, and to whom are they accountable? What is the decisionmaking structure? How does the current issue, policy, or program shift power dynamics to better integrate community voices and priorities?

Source: Multnomah County Office of Diversity and Equity.

After completing an initial needs assessment, Promise Neighborhoods should update segmentation analyses periodically to understand how outcomes are changing across specific groups. As we discuss in the final step, updated data, collected and analyzed as part of the performance management cycle, helps leaders consider the equitable implementation or disparate impacts of solutions, the targeting of resources to different participants, and whether outcomes continue to differ by subgroups.

Step 2. Set Performance Results and Indicators and Identify Partners

After completing a needs assessment, including a segmentation analysis that looks at different groups of people to be served by the initiative and the factors underlying their outcomes, Promise Neighborhoods look to the future to create a vision for the results the initiative will achieve and a road map to achieve them. This is often called setting performance targets or a plan to turn the curve on outcomes that have historically trended in the wrong direction. This discussion should be grounded in the foundation of the initiative's theory of change, logic model, or results framework, all of which refer to a road map that will take the initiative from point A to point B. Promise Neighborhoods cannot bring an equity lens to bear on their work unless they use equitable processes in going about that work, including the process of creating a vision for results and a road map to get there. Cocreation is an important tool for place-based initiatives focused on equitable results.

Cocreation

Cocreation, a business-world concept, advocates for the shared creation of value between the consumers and providers of a service or product (Kambil, Friesen, and Sundaram 1999). In social services, health care, or community building, cocreation means giving community residents an equal voice in designing the strategies and activities meant to enhance their well-being and keeping them engaged throughout implementation, refinement, evaluation, and sustainability planning (Lynch 2016). Being measurably “cocreative” (e.g., in the percentage of leadership roles held by community residents) indicates that an initiative is committed to some level of equity.

Cocreation has real implications for how effective and enduring a Promise Neighborhoods solution can be because people who directly experience a problem often have a clear understanding of the root causes and of the complex and nuanced ways in which it plays out in the community. People directly affected also bring an awareness of how different solutions may play out, information vital for planning successful strategies. Partner organizations with formal agreements to deliver different solutions (e.g., home visiting) should, of course, help design the solutions they will help implement, but cocreation recognizes that community residents and grassroots entities are often adept at targeting solutions to the areas of most need and pointing out the most effective and strategic investment of resources.

BOX 2

Cocreation in the Newark Fairmount Promise Neighborhood

The Newark Fairmount Promise Neighborhood (NFPN) helps parents and students become leaders of the initiative and in the community. NFPN’s Parent Academy trains parents to become advocates for neighborhood children and to become school-based paraprofessionals who tutor, support after-school programming, and monitor attendance. NFPN’s summer New Ark Freedom School offers students entering the third through fifth grades training on civic engagement and social action as part of a curriculum designed to curb “summer melt” and close achievement gaps.^a Developed by the Children’s Defense Fund, the Freedom School’s model stresses pride in one’s ethnic or racial community, intergenerational leadership to improve communities, and supportive relationships among peers.^b

^a“New Ark Freedom School,” Rutgers Office of University-Community Partnerships, accessed October 25, 2019, <https://oucp.newark.rutgers.edu/our-programs/new-ark-freedom-schools/>.

^b“CDF Freedom Schools,” Children’s Defense Fund, accessed October 25, 2019, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/cdf-freedom-schools/>.

To be fully cocreative, Promise Neighborhoods grantees and their partners, such as school administrators and service providers, must forfeit some power to make room for the people most affected by the problems they seek to address. They should also be prepared to invest tangible resources into expanding and capitalizing on the skills of residents and grassroots organizations, recognizing that not everyone will come to the table with the same resources, access, background

knowledge, and power. The following approaches can foster cocreation by ensuring the equitable involvement of community residents side by side with other partners:

- **Frame the Promise Neighborhood’s vision and goals in ways that incorporate community members’ ideas and language.** Overarching governance bodies (e.g., steering committees) should not have separate “resident advisory councils” but should seat all stakeholders at decisionmaking tables together so the initiative reflects the community’s ideas and language. Locally recognized and trusted individuals (e.g., members of the clergy and civic association leaders) should have decisionmaking and leadership roles from the start and should identify other local leaders (both formal and informal) and bridge communication and trust gaps between stakeholders as planning and implementation advances.
- **Build trust and heal wounds.** For communities that have experienced systematic oppression and repeated violations of trust, the following activities may be needed to build a strong foundation for cocreation:
 - » frank conversations between community members and organizations working in the community to address historical tensions, grievances, and misconceptions and to reset relationships
 - » analysis of the interactions between community members and organizations working in the community to make such interactions more equitable (e.g., how interactions between schools and families shape the willingness of students and families to engage with schools)
- **Engage community members in the collection and interpretation of data used to plan and monitor the Promise Neighborhood’s strategies.** Neighborhood residents should be encouraged to contribute their observations, generate questions about data collected and produced by the initiative, and analyze root causes and results. All partners—within and outside the neighborhood—should receive data training that is accessible in relevant languages and at appropriate reading levels for most stakeholders. Community-based participatory research methods often work well to bring resident perspectives into the initiative’s continuous improvement work. For example, “photovoice” is a process through which people—usually those with limited power because of poverty, language barriers, race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, or other circumstances—use videos or photos to capture aspects of their community and experiences and share them with others.² Opportunities to review data should be co-led by at least one community member and should be understandable to participants who do not have a data background. For more ideas, see Brady, Goins, and Young (2019).
- **Manage power dynamics.** Sometimes partners that have abundant resources will consciously or unconsciously use knowledge of hidden political, institutional, or social rules to advance their interests and ideas over those of residents or grassroots organizations. Promise Neighborhoods can prevent this by naming the power differentials and making them visible, listening to community members (or less-resourced partners), acknowledging community members’ expertise and respecting their experiences, and looking for opportunities to build community leadership and put community members in leadership roles. Community-based asset mapping, a

process by which stakeholders assess the resources, skills, and experiences available in a community, can be helpful in recognizing and addressing power imbalances.

BOX 3

Capacity Building for Equity across Stakeholder Groups in the STEPS Alaska Promise Neighborhood

The Supporting Transitions and Educational Promise Southeast (STEPS) Alaska Promise Neighborhood covers seven communities across the state's southeast panhandle, which is also the traditional lands of the Tlingit and Haida peoples. Alaska Natives have endured centuries of systemic racism and discrimination, including forced loss of lands and culture. Because Alaska Native students experience adverse childhood experiences and related educational disparities at rates that exceed state and national averages, the STEPS grantee agency, the Association of Alaska School Boards, regularly engages in capacity building aimed at achieving equity across all partners, including families, tribal entities, schools, and nonprofit providers.

After winning the federal Promise Neighborhood designation, the grantee leadership team formally launched STEPS by facilitating a two-day meeting with more than 70 participants representing the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, the Association for the Education of Young Children, six southeast school districts, nonprofits, tribes, and the University of Alaska Southeast. During the meeting, participants reviewed data on availability of high-quality child care, college enrollment and completion rates, academic success, cultural connectedness, health and safety, family and community engagement, and the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Participants were supported to meaningfully engage with the data to identify strategies centered around such goals as equity in educational outcomes, increasing cultural opportunities and cultural competence, and building resiliency through community supports and trauma-informed environments.

Subsequent recommendations from a work group focused on promoting resilience and trauma-informed environments and giving guidance on how to modify provider trainings to reflect the child-rearing strengths and practices of indigenous peoples. The recommendations also covered mechanisms for boosting the cultural competence of school- and community-based trainers, such as by having Alaska Natives copresent with and educate non-Native trainers on traditional structures within Native communities, and provided feedback on power differentials and approaches to data collection within marginalized communities.

Step 3. Deliver a Continuum of Solutions and Evidence-Based Strategies

In the same way Promise Neighborhoods strive to cocreate a vision for how they will improve outcomes, the continuum of solutions should also be cocreated. For Promise Neighborhoods, solutions include strategies, programs, policies, and other resources that partners contribute to achieve the common outcome targets described in step 2. Targeted universalism is another tool for Promise Neighborhoods seeking to cocreate a continuum of solutions designed to achieve equitable results from cradle to college and career.

Targeted universalism is resonating with federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, n.d.), funding entities such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Simmons 2016), and public school systems such as Seattle Public Schools,³ which applied targeted universalism to focus on ethnically and linguistically diverse students in its Eliminating Opportunity Gaps campaign. Boston Public Schools adopted targeted universalism and identified “the interface between schools and historically marginalized populations” as a barrier to marginalized students and families’ access to a great education and as an area of opportunity to close achievement gaps (Rose and Donkor Issa 2018, 14).

Targeted Universalism

Targeted universalism is a concept developed by John A. Powell, director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley. Powell (2012, 233) describes a targeted universal strategy as one that is “inclusive of the needs of both dominant and marginalized groups, but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginalized group.” A key component of the concept is that problems that hurt a small segment of a population often spill over and hurt larger groups. Problem solvers who apply targeted universalism should set “universal goals that can be achieved through targeted approaches.”

Consider, for example, how racially discriminatory mortgage lending practices led to the underdevelopment of majority-black neighborhoods and prevented residents from building wealth during the 19th and 20th centuries. This place-based policy created conditions that still undermine the outcomes and upward mobility of many black children, families, and communities (Perry, Rothwell, and Harshbarger 2018). Though marginalized groups experience the worst consequences of inequitable lending practices in their educational, career, and life outcomes, disparities between these groups and others harm the progress of larger communities (i.e., the whole neighborhood, city, state, or nation) through persistent spillover effects such as poverty, lost productivity, and underdevelopment of talent. Through a targeted universal lens, place-based initiative leaders can attend to the well-being of the overall community by attending to the needs of marginalized subgroups within the community.

Powell cautions against strategies that are either too universal or too targeted by arguing that strategies that are too broad or universal often make universal assumptions that may not hold true for marginalized groups, may not identify or address factors such as discrimination, and may not account for differences in or access to resources. Universal strategies may also distribute resources across some advantaged groups that could instead be targeted to disadvantaged groups, exacerbating rather than ameliorating disparities between groups. Strategies that are overly targeted, on the other hand, have been critiqued as unfairly favoring specific groups over the public good, further stigmatizing already marginalized groups. Thus, Powell argues for an approach that targets policies and programs to reach specific populations by design as an intentional strategy to reach universal goals. This results in an approach that is both universal in addressing the collective well-being of the community and inclusive of marginalized groups, by considering and acknowledging where groups are situated—that is, their access to and ownership of power and resources—within a larger system (Powell 2012, 233).

Developing a Targeted Universal Strategy

powell (2016) articulates five steps for developing a targeted universal strategy. The first four steps align with the Promise Neighborhoods performance management cycle and the steps already addressed in this brief:

1. articulate a particular goal based upon a robust understanding and analysis of the problem at hand (aligned with the Promise Neighborhoods target setting and theory of change process)
2. assess the difference of the general population from the universal goal (aligned with the Promise Neighborhoods target setting and theory of change process)
3. assess how particular geographies and population segments diverge from the goal (aligned with the Promise Neighborhoods needs assessment and segmentation analysis)
4. assess barriers to achieving the goal for each group or geography (aligned with the Promise Neighborhoods needs assessment and segmentation analysis)

By this point in the performance management cycle, Promise Neighborhood leaders and communities will have much of the information they need to develop targeted universal strategies (or solutions, in Promise Neighborhoods lingo). They are prepared for the fifth step:

5. develop strategies that advance results for all children and families by achieving greater equity for specific groups of children and families

Targeted universalism recognizes that if barriers block opportunities for certain community members, the entire community is hurt because it is counterproductive to the community's larger goals. Universal solutions, such as publicly funded preschool for all children, can be intentionally targeted to specific children by creating additional slots or enhanced supports for preschools in distressed neighborhoods, for example. This targeted approach can be a more results-oriented and cost-effective way to achieve common goals than a one-size-fits-all approach that produces uneven outcomes across groups. In table 2, powell, Heller, and Bundalli (2011) show how it might look to develop different strategies targeted to specific groups to advance a universal goal of joyful and meaningful education for all children.

TABLE 2

Applying Targeted Strategies to a Universal Goal

Universal Goal: Joyful and Meaningful Education for All Children	
Group	Targeted strategies
All children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources and supports to cultivate, retain, and nurture effective teachers and administrators Curriculum and pedagogical approaches that support social-emotional development and collaborative problem solving Curriculum that validates family culture and counters negative stereotypes about their groups and the groups to which their peers belong
Low-socioeconomic-status children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nutritious meals, stable housing, medical care
Children of color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and pedagogical approaches for teachers, administrators, and students that counter the unconscious impact of pervasive negative stereotypes
Non-English-speaking children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English language supports; first-language supports Interpretation and outreach in parent's first language

Source: John A. Powell, Connie Cagampang Heller, and Fayza Bundalli, *Systems Thinking and Race: Workshop Summary* (Los Angeles: The California Endowment, 2011).

Step 4. Review Performance and Continuously Improve

The performance management cycle is a continuous improvement process, and leaders must use the tools in the equity toolbox at each step. Promise Neighborhoods are familiar with the results-based accountability model, and the model's concepts of population and performance accountability align with the targeted universalism approach discussed above. Although population accountability is about quality of life for an entire community, performance accountability is about how well a program, agency, or service system is doing its part for the people it serves directly (Results Leadership Group 2010). Performance accountability is crucial to reaching people in subgroups with the specific interventions most likely to improve their well-being, which, in turn, should lead to population accountability measurable at the community level.

An earlier Promise Neighborhoods best practice brief (Bogle, Gillespie, and Hayes 2015), which originally defined the Promise Neighborhoods performance management cycle, illustrates the three types of performance management questions Promise Neighborhoods should ask and how case management data can support continuous improvement (box 4). The tools described in this equity toolkit, such as the equity empowerment lens, cocreation, and targeted universalism, can deepen the collection and analysis of case management data to advance equitable outcomes.

BOX 4

Continually Improving Promise Neighborhoods: The Role of Case Management Data

Promise Neighborhoods must seek to understand the *who*, the *what*, and the *so what* from both a population and a performance accountability perspective. In other words, who receives services, what services do partners provide, and do the efforts (collectively and individually) make any difference? Case management data are invaluable to answering these questions. Bogle, Gillespie, and Hayes offer examples of how program and performance managers can use case management data to assess results across population and performance accountability levels by asking the *who*, *what*, and *so what* questions.^a

^a Mary Bogle, Sarah Gillespie, and Christopher R. Hayes, *Continually Improving Promise Neighborhoods: The Role of Case Management Data* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015).

Using ESSA to Support Equity

Recent legislation created another powerful tool in the equity toolkit for Promise Neighborhoods. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, which reauthorized and amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the nation's primary K–12 federal education law, created new levers for advancing equity and excellence in US schools. ESSA included additional protections for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students, as well as requirements that states, districts, and schools design education systems responsive to local needs and context so all students are better prepared for college and careers. ESSA folded authorization of Promise Neighborhoods into Title IV of the law in recognition of the need for a comprehensive approach to educating the nation's most vulnerable and underserved children. Promise Neighborhoods should explore their state's ESSA plan to learn how states hold schools and districts accountable for requirements under the new law. The neighborhoods should also become familiar with the performance data collected in state accountability systems so they can monitor and contribute to how equity is being advanced for their neighborhood's children. The final section of this technical assistance brief outlines valuable aspects of ESSA for Promise Neighborhoods to leverage in pursuit of equitable outcomes. These aspects are discussed together, as they may be applied to many steps in the performance management cycle.

[The Elementary and Secondary Education Act] has been our nation's most important civil rights law for promoting equity within education.

—Angela Glover Blackwell, President and CEO, PolicyLink

Stakeholder Engagement

To support locally designed and responsive education systems, stakeholders, including and especially families, play an important role in leveraging the new opportunities provided under ESSA to advance equity and excellence in education for all children. ESSA requires states, districts, and schools to involve families in understanding and assessing needs in schools and districts identified for comprehensive and targeted school improvement under Title I. It also requires local education agencies (LEAs) to set aside funds for parent and family engagement, to share responsibilities for student academic achievement, and to build capacity for effective involvement of parents and families via training, materials, and coordination with other community programs. Promise Neighborhoods can work with schools and school districts to design a cocreative process through which parents, community members, and other partners can determine how to advance their ideas and expectations for equity under Title I and ESSA overall.

Student Assessments and Teacher Quality

ESSA requires states to implement performance assessments that measure “higher-order thinking skills and understanding,” allowing the use of “portfolios, projects, or extended-performance tasks” and computer-based adaptive assessments, as part of state assessment systems. Performance assessment, also known as alternative or authentic assessment, requires students to perform a task, rather than select an answer from a ready-made list, such as explaining a historical event, generating a scientific hypothesis, or solving a math problem.⁴ ESSA’s shift toward performance assessment, and away from an emphasis on standardized testing in the preceding No Child Left Behind Act legislation, may be a better fit for understanding needs and outcomes for certain students and schools.

ESSA also requires states to have a plan for ensuring all students have effective, experienced, and in-field teachers. States must monitor and address disparities in access to experienced and effective teachers among students of color and students from low-income households and may also track and address disparities in access for students with disabilities, English language learners, and others, such as rural students.

Promise Neighborhoods should use their state ESSA plans to work with school partners toward strong student assessments and high-quality instruction.

Resource Equity and Transparency

ESSA supports multiple levers for the equitable distribution of educational resources. The law requires states to uniformly calculate and report actual per pupil spending on school report cards and to evaluate and address resource inequities for schools identified as needing intervention assistance. States and districts must report expenditures of federal, state, and local funds for each school and district, disaggregated by funding source. LEA improvement plans must identify inequities in resource distribution, and states must invest in shortfalls for schools identified as needing assistance. Promise

Neighborhoods can engage with LEAs around improvement plans for target schools, aligning them with the Promise Neighborhoods theory of change, performance targets, and continuum of solutions.

LEAs are also required to engage in continued consultation with family, community-based organizations, and local government representatives to apply for and obtain Title IV funds. This is intended to assure that implementation is coordinated with other programs and strategies being conducted in the community. ESSA requires states with insufficient Title I school improvement funds to make awards to each LEA that submits an approvable application and to prioritize resources to LEAs that propose using evidence-based interventions, supported by the strongest evidence available, and that demonstrate a commitment to family and community engagement. The law stipulates that states may consider partnering with a Promise Neighborhood as grounds for qualifying under these priorities.

Multiple Measures to Assess School Performance and Progress

Rather than focus only on test scores, ESSA requires the use and reporting of additional measures for accountability, such as school climate, chronic absenteeism, suspension and expulsion rates, and college and career readiness. ESSA also requires the inclusion of one or more indicators of “school quality or student success,” such as a high-quality college- and career-ready curriculum, effective teachers, and strong parent and community engagement. Promise Neighborhoods can work with schools to develop, analyze, and discuss these indicators and identify other strong performance measures to examine using an equity lens, such as access to and completion of advanced coursework and school discipline statistics.

Putting Theory into Action

This brief introduces tools for advancing equitable outcomes for students and families. These tools lend themselves to the performance management cycle recommended for Promise Neighborhoods and all comprehensive community change initiatives. They include applying an equity and empowerment lens to deepen the needs assessment and segmentation analysis, using a cocreative process to sharpen performance targets, developing targeted universal strategies along the continuum of solutions, and working toward population and performance accountability for continuous improvement. Finally, we highlight a few key aspects of the Every Student Succeeds Act and how Promise Neighborhoods can leverage requirements for state ESSA plans to advance equitable outcomes in target schools, in alignment with Promise Neighborhood results. But the power of these tools can be realized only by Promise Neighborhoods that lead the way by putting theory into action.

Notes

- ¹ “Promise Neighborhoods Program,” US Department of Education, Promise Neighborhoods, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/background/promise-neighborhoods-program>.
- ² “Section 20. Implementing Photovoice in Your Community,” Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main>.
- ³ “FAQ: Eliminating Opportunity Gaps Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ),” Seattle Public Schools, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://seattleschools.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=627&pageId=15127967>.
- ⁴ David Sweet, “Office of Education Research: Consumer Guide,” US Department of Education, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/perfasse.html>.

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