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## **Abstract**

Inequity and marginalization exist within educational structures, policies, and practices. As such, practitioners, like district-level leaders need a clearer understanding of the barriers and their role in making meaning and shaping progress to overcome the disconnect between their beliefs, data, and meaningful and sustainable action. This study sought to understand regional efforts and influences of district leaders around issues of academic tracking and acceleration. As a result of a desire for transformation, this qualitative research study closely examined high-level district leaders by analyzing how they view academic tracking and acceleration within their organizations, how they address issues of equity within acceleration and course tracking systems, and how they navigate what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts.

The study focused on the following three research questions: What are the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration? How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools? and How does regional influences and pressure impact decision-making and change efforts?

Twelve district leaders consisting of Superintendents of Schools and Assistant Superintendents / Directors of Curriculum & Instruction from six suburban school districts within one region of New York State participated in the study. Data were collected using semi-structured, joint, and focus group interviews, participant observations, and artifacts / historical document reviews. The data was informed by a conceptual framework that combined the tracking reform framework of Oakes (1992), the equity-focused change framework for school leadership by Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharis (2021), and Theoharis and Scanlan's (2015) practices for socially just leadership.

Both inductive and deductive coding were utilized to generate categories and themes for the qualitative data as part of the analysis. For the supplemental, yet very limited, quantitative/descriptive data used within this study, proportional representation and disproportionality were the primary concepts used for analysis. Additionally, pivot tables and 100% stacked bar charts were used to represent the descriptive data.

Results of this study revealed that regionally there are many oppressive patterns that are allowed to exist within the suburban districts / schools. Moreover, the study's findings indicated that the leaders all have good intentions, but little is done to disrupt tracking within the districts / schools. The study suggests that district leaders need to employ collective efforts and strategies, all of which require educators to actively work together to influence, change, and counteract pressures that create inequity within academic tracking and acceleration programs, to eliminate barriers and ensure access for all students.

Leading for Equity: Understanding the influences, realities, resistance, and beliefs  
around tracking and acceleration in suburban school districts

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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May 2023

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## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank my dissertation committee chairperson and advisor, Dr. George Theoharis, as well as committee members, Dr. Leela George and Dr. Courtney Mauldin for guiding, mentoring, and supporting me through this lengthy endeavor. Through their efforts I was intellectually challenged and questioned while engaging in this meaningful work. I am confident I am a more thoughtful leader, scholar, and researcher because of their feedback, perspectives, and thoughtful insights.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to members of my doctoral cohort. For the past three years, these dedicated educators have pushed me, as well as supported me through the program and this culminating research study. They have all helped me learn and grow as a socially just leader engaged in inquiry, inclusion, and action.

I would like to thank my work family – the building and district-level leaders who support me, each other, as well as all of the students and staff members of my school district. It is because of their dedication, passion, and commitment to helping and empowering others to reach their full potential that I was motivated to challenge my beliefs, biases, and privileges by growing and learning as a leader.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my family. Thank you to my wife - Kate, sons - Sam and Max, and parents for all of the love, support, and encouragement I received as I completed this dissertation. I am hopeful that all of the time I spent writing and reflecting on this work has made me a better educational leader, husband, father, son and human being.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

**eq·ui·ty** *ek-wi-tee*, noun.

Just and fair inclusion. An equitable society is one in which all can participate and prosper. The Goals of equity must be to create conditions that allow all to reach their full potential. In short, equity creates a path from hope to change.

- Blackwell (2018)

In today's middle and high school settings, students use learning pathways and instructional coursework, including experiences, to construct academic resumes worthy of a competitive edge for college and/or career. As with all curricular opportunities, decisions, choices, and offerings, the debate surrounding access and achievement for all students calls into question the inequities our systems create for many students, specifically, students of color, low income/poverty, and/or with disabilities (Oakes, Joseph, & Muir, 2004; Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008; Oakes, 2008; Burris, Welner, & Bezoza, 2009; Kruse, 2019).

To compound issues of inequity and marginalization that educational structures, policies, and practices create, when examining student achievement, acceleration, and tracking, an intersectional view of social inequalities, on behalf of individual and groups of students, highlights the complexity of our systems (Collins, 2013). This viewpoint amplifies a need for high-level district leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents, and directors of curriculum & instruction), in collaboration with building leaders (principals and assistant principals),

teachers, and community members, to reflect, refine, improve and enhance our systems so all students have access to high quality, culturally responsive, and rigorous curriculums (Theoharis and Scanlan, 2015).

District leaders play a critical role in establishing, enforcing, and adjusting policies, regulations, and procedures for ensuring equal access, opportunity, and choice for students. More specifically, socially just school leaders adopt critical approaches to addressing issues of acceleration and tracking because they recognize the importance that politics, power, influence, and perspective have on our institutions and social world. For that reason, application of equity-focused theories can assist educators and socially just leaders by providing a framework for examining the impact change and decision-making has on the disenfranchised, oppressed, marginalized, and less privileged members of society (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Capper, 1998, 2018).

Additionally, as articulated by Theoharis (2007), leaders can be faced with resistance and pressure when implementing change or while working toward social justice leadership. As such, it can be inferred that high-level district leaders encounter pressure and influence from colleagues and stakeholders based on the actions, initiatives, and decisions of neighboring school leaders and districts. Furthermore, competition and conforming to societal expectations can influence how stakeholders perceive or judge a leader's actions, principles, and/or decision-making.

One example of how decisions, regional influence, and pressure impact the decisions of district leaders occurs frequently when inclement weather forces leaders to make quick decisions about closing school for the day, implementing remote instruction, or choosing to remain open

for in-person instruction. As often observed, once one leader decides to close school for the day, the domino effect results in other district leaders following suit. This form of peer pressure and influence may create conflict, as well as added stress to conform to regional norms.

To highlight positive influence and change, experience suggests that when leaders work collaboratively to enhance opportunities for students, strength in numbers and support can help bring movement to new initiatives. For example, when a collection of school districts, through the direction of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), expressed interest in expanding problem-based learning (PBL) opportunities for students, regional influence, support, collaboration, and collective knowledge created an environment and contingency to counteract resistance and fear to move the necessary initiative forward. Regional unity and strength in numbers proved essential to implementing change. As such, understanding regional influence, realities, beliefs, and resistance are critical components for leaders to recognize as they implement change.

As it stands, there is a need to expand and enhance the literature that exists in the area equity of K-12 leadership within tracking and acceleration systems. More specifically, we know academic tracking as a practice of sorting and separating students in courses and curriculums based on ability levels (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) and academic acceleration as students being afford the opportunity to take advance level coursework while in a preceding grade level. Practitioners need a clearer understanding of the barriers and their role in making meaning and shaping progress to overcome the disconnect between beliefs, data, and action. In so much, this study seeks to understand regional efforts and influences of district leaders. As a result of a desire for transformation, this qualitative study closely examined high-level district leaders by analyzing how they view tracking and acceleration within their organizations, how

they address issues of equity within acceleration and course tracking systems, and how they navigate what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts.

## **Results of Preliminary Study**

In a prior study conducted as part of a research apprenticeship, five (5) district leaders in a high performing school district, as measured and reported on the New York State Education Department Performance Report Cards, in the Central New York region of New York State participated. The district of employment for the leaders, the third largest suburban public school system within the county, serves a little over 5,500 students in eight school buildings. The district has five elementary schools (K-5), one middle school (grades 6 & 7), one junior high (grades 8 & 9), and one high school (grades 10-12). The study addressed the following research questions: 1) How do school leaders make sense of their role in and address equity within acceleration, course tracking and stratification of students? 2) How do leaders understand the complexity of the current relationship between access, achievement, and opportunities within student learning and course selections?

The qualitative methods and ethnographic approach for data collection within the study included participant observations, informal semi-structured interviews, and historical product/document review (artifacts). Through the collection of data, the construction of truth and meaning was established / uncovered. As a researcher conducting the study, I reflected on the following: 1) What are leaders doing? How are they doing it? 2) What are leaders saying? How do they explain things? 3) What is documented or symbolized in the documents/artifacts (i.e., policies, regulations, criteria, etc.)? The data generated / produced from this small study was organized and analyzed using an open coding system. Three (3) major themes emerged as a



result of the analysis of the data: 1) Shared Commitments of Social Justice and Equity 2) Role Leaders Can Play in Challenging the Status Quo 3) What Prevents Progress / Change.

The participants / district leaders identified *Shared Commitments of Social Justice and Equity* which highlight the claim that leaders who strive for equity within tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students take on a critical approach to addressing marginalization and underrepresentation of students. These leaders focused on de-tracking efforts to address inequity, opportunity gaps, accountability, and representation of all students. They held shared commitments and beliefs like: personal drive, motivation, ability to reflect, support, advocate, and build relationships, as well as understand the meaning of access, which all align with social justice work within K-12 schools.

District leaders also shared their *Role in Challenging the Status Quo*. More specifically, this theme, based on the interview data, centered on how leaders challenge norms and resistance within their school settings. Leaders challenge the status quo by understanding the technical, political, and normative aspects of tracking. The data suggested challenging the status quo means leading by example, focusing on data, curriculum, and grading practices, as well as recognizing bias, privilege, and personal experiences all impact decision-making. Furthermore, study participants shared examples of how they challenge the status quo by addressing policies, regulations, practices, and procedures related to tracking and course acceleration.

Lastly, participants communicated *What Prevents Progress and Change* in addressing inequality and marginalization within acceleration, tracking, and course stratification. While all of the leaders conveyed socially just leadership qualities and characteristics, they struggled to move their staff and communities forward because of a variety of barriers like: staff mindset,

leaders lack of skills, structural issues, and lack of synergy between stakeholders. Ultimately, this research, analysis, and interpretation of the data brings to light and/or identifies the stumbling blocks that prevent leaders from organizational, institutional, and equitable change within school systems.

In summary, this preliminary study provided evidence and insight into how leaders make sense of their role in addressing equity within acceleration, course tracking, and stratification systems. Furthermore, it provided me, as the researcher, with clarity around understanding the relationship between access, achievement, and opportunity related to course selections from a district leadership perspective. As highlighted, this study contributed to a better understanding of the shared commitments of social justice and equity, the role leaders play in challenging the status quo, as well as the what prevents progress and change for leaders as they contemplate and address academic tracking and acceleration systems within their organizations.

### **Motivation for the Study**

My interest in examining the influences, realities, resistance, and beliefs of academic tracking and acceleration of students within suburban school districts is a direct result of having engaged in socially just and equity focused leadership coursework as part of my doctoral studies at Syracuse University, as well as after examining equity data as a district-leader in a suburban school district and noticing change is needed. More specifically, as a high-level district leader responsible for enforcing and advocating change to instructional policies, practices, and regulations for students in grades PK-12, I quickly learned that our systems, structures, and expectations often reinforce inequities among the experiences and opportunities our students get in a relatively high achieving school district. My district's data brought to light that students of

color, mainly black and multiracial students, as well as students labeled as having a disability, did not have access to advanced level course work and accelerated programming like other groups of students. This inequity and marginalization of students compelled me to willingly advocate and champion change to support the learning and educational needs of all students, especially those students most often marginalized and/or oppressed because of our institution's long held norms, traditions, and beliefs.

Over time, the realization that strong leaders need to advocate for and improve the learning experiences of all students has become and remained central to my focus as a leader. It has brought about clarity and motivation for doing this important work. My desire to ensure equity in student experiences for all students requires me to guide others toward seeing how privilege, bias, and personal experiences impact teaching and leadership decisions which directly affect the experiences of our students. The desire to lead and highlight equity-focused change by advocating for and supporting all students, especially the underserved, marginalized, and oppressed, was motivation for me to engage in this extensive dissertation study.

To conclude, this study is also an opportunity to expand on my initial findings from my research apprenticeship project. While the focus of that project centered on understanding roles and relationships of leaders as they understand, promote, and implore equity change within acceleration and tracking systems, this dissertation study scrutinized leaders' beliefs, realities, and understanding of academic tracking and acceleration beyond a one school system view. As such, a commitment to equity focused and socially just leadership change evoked a personal desire and motivation for me to determine if regional efforts and influence can shape beliefs and actions resulting in a better understanding of how organizations address issues of equity within acceleration and course tracking systems.

## **Significance of the Study / Statement of the Problem**

Having recently conducted research on how district leaders in one school district make sense of their role in and address equity within acceleration, course tracking and stratification of students, I have learned that district leaders embrace shared commitments of social justice and equity. These leaders acknowledged having a personal drive and motivation to do better, as well as a shared belief in supporting and advocating for all students. This work has led to a stronger understanding of how leaders within an organization challenge the status quo by focusing their efforts on data, curriculum, and grading practices, as well as leading by example. Additionally, these leaders recognize how bias, privilege, and personal experiences all influence decision-making. They are comfortable with addressing policies regulations, practices, and procedures related to acceleration and tracking. These actions, which all challenge the status quo, align with Oakes' (1992) technical, political and normative dimensions of understanding academic tracking and grouping of students. Likewise, the research apprenticeship project / study brought forth a need for further interrogation as to why efforts to de-track course structures and systems are prevented because of staff mindset, a leader's lack of skills, structural issues, and lack of synergy among key stakeholders.

To further amplify the critical role district leaders have in ensuring equity and access, supplemental rationale for change is evident in guidance shared by the New York State Education Department on November 18, 2019 regarding equitable course access. As articulated to the field by the New York State Education Department (2019), data shows Latino, Black, and American Indian students in public schools are underrepresented in gatekeeper courses and advanced coursework. Similarly, students of color are far less likely to attend schools that 1) offer advanced level coursework and/or 2) allow students to enroll in advanced level coursework.

Based on a need and renewed desire for ensuring equity and access for all students, this unique qualitative dissertation study closely examined the role district leaders have in navigating regional influences and pressures associated with tracking, acceleration and accountability.

## **Research Questions**

This qualitative study addresses the following questions, which contribute to the field of PK-12 leadership:

- 1) What are the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration?
  - What do district leaders say about tracking and acceleration?
  - How do district leaders group students within their organizations?
  - What are acceleration and track options in each organization's middle and high schools?
- 2) How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools?
  - What do district leaders do about tracking and acceleration?
  - What do district leaders say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts?
  - How do district leaders address race, gender, class, and ability hierarchies with course tracking and acceleration systems?
- 3) How do regional influences and pressures impact decision-making and change efforts?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this dissertation study combines the tracking reform framework of Oakes (1992), the equity-focused change framework for school leadership by Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharis (2021), and Theoharis and Scanlan's (2015) practices for socially just leadership. My conceptual framework assisted me as I thought about and framed my dissertation questions, interview and focus group questions, as well as the analysis for this study. Each framework and practice connect in some way to how I see and view the world as a researcher conducting the study and as a practicing school leader working toward equity-focused change to academic tracking and acceleration systems in PK-12 schools.

As a novice researcher, I relied on a basic foundational understanding of the tracking reform framework of Oakes (1992). She suggests that researchers, school leaders, and other practitioners situate their understanding of tracking and reform from three dimensions – the technical, normative and political. Within the technical dimension of tracking, curriculum, content knowledge, instructional strategies, and resources (i.e., accommodations, assessments, and instructional staffing) are different among courses and levels. In short, the technical strategies, structures, and resources include how school systems and their leaders organize space, time, people, and materials. The curriculum and pedagogical strategies and approaches include exposing staff and students to professional development and training, in addition to specialized knowledge. As described, the differences in strategies, structures, and resources create inequity among the experiences students engage in and have access to within their schools. Oakes (1992) describes examples of detracking through the technical dimension as creating new course offerings and schedules, curriculum specifications, training, and smaller learning and classroom environments.

In the normative dimension of tracking, teachers, leaders, and other practitioners create courses and pathways based on abilities and longstanding social norms to sort students and provide specific curriculum to address social-political pressures. More specifically, the normative dimension of academic tracking refers to the beliefs, values, and perspectives held by stakeholders, teachers, leaders, and decision makers (Oakes, 1992). In short, the normative aspect discloses the assumptions individuals have about what is true, good, just, fair, and right about teaching and learning. As an example, this way of thinking about academic tracking results in teachers and leaders believing that because individual student needs and abilities vary from student to student, that course, class, and school experiences should prepare students differently for work, career, and life.

Lastly, in the political dimension of tracking, the production of inequity in learning opportunities, access, and school resources is amplified between low and high track classes and courses because of pressure and interest to maintain norms and competition within the educational system. More specifically, the political dimension of tracking is related to power and resource stratification in schools. The practice of tracking is inherently linked to racial, gender, and socioeconomic stratification of students (Oakes 1992). The debate between students who gain access into certain programs, as well as how and when they gain access are particularly important questions to consider when examining tracking and acceleration through the political dimension. As shared by Oakes (1992), reform and change to create opportunity for traditionally underserved and underrepresented student populations and groups threatens the interests of powerful populations and groups of students which inherently creates constraints and barriers to successful implementation. Within the political dimension, schools and leaders must establish new normative values and beliefs, in addition to reallocating resources, influences, and structures

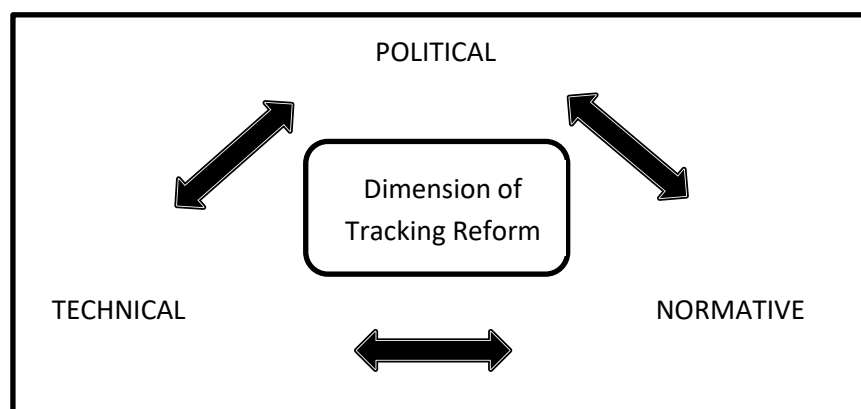
to address inequities. Oakes' (1992) dimensions of tracking reform is represented within Figure 1.1.

Since tracking is complex, dynamic and interconnected, it is important to examine the literature, and this proposed dissertation study through these lenses. As described by Oakes (1992),

a focus on normative and political matters, as well as on technical considerations, seems essential, since these dimensions help explain why tracking was created, and why it has lasted so long. Unless we understand and change the norms and politics that buttress tracking, school structures and practices will remain impervious to reform. (p. 12)

As educators, leaders, and other practitioners continue to examine tracking through Oakes' (1992) three (3) dimensions of tracking it is essential to expand the scope of work to include the creation of new norms, socio-political relationships, and technologies (curriculum, instructional strategies, resources) to create reform that will address the longstanding school cultures, curriculums, and systems which maintain inequity among experiences, access, and learning opportunities for students.

Figure 1.1 Oakes' (1992) Dimensions of Tracking & Reform





While it was important for me to frame, understand, and utilize Oakes (1992) dimensions of tracking framework as I conceptualized and conducted this study, it was also critical to situate this study on Radd et al.'s (2021) equity-focused change framework. Accordingly, the authors encourage the use of this framework to guide and inspire systemic equity-focused change. Conceptually and practically applied, Radd et al. (2021) contends that “change is difficult, and change for equity is far more challenging than other changes because it requires high levels of personal investment in areas that cause tension and discomfort” (p. 180). That being understood, issues and challenges surrounding academic tracking and acceleration likely cause tension and discomfort among leaders, teachers, other practitioners, students, and parents / guardians because of what Oakes (1992) refers to as the normative and political dimensions which bring forth deep rooted beliefs about what is best for student achievement, access, and equity (Radd et al. 2021).

The main principles of Radd et al.'s (2021) framework on equity-focused change center on the desire to understand the ‘what’ that needs change through collaboration with a variety of stakeholders. As indicated, leaders play a critical role in providing direction, motivation, and support through an “inclusive, collaborative process that seek, respond to, and are informed by multiple and historically marginalized perspectives” (Radd et al., 2021, p. 182). Understanding how school leaders may utilize equity audits as they relate to understanding academic tracking and acceleration to influence systemic change is important to this study.

As highlighted by Radd et al. (2021) once school leaders and stakeholders understand the ‘what’ that needs change, they work collaboratively to develop a strategic approach through a theory of action and theory of change. It is by working through the ‘how’ and the ‘who’ a leader is able to lead, clarify, and influence to pursue equity. More specifically,

In this change model, your careful consideration of what should change (guided by an equity audit), your strategy, who should lead and who is expected to follow, and the internal and external contexts are all influenced by you as a leader. (p. 191)

While Oakes (1992) and Radd et al. (2021) frameworks provide a structure for developing perceptive ideas and analysis of how leaders may view and understand academic tracking and acceleration, as they lead and influence equity change, it is through Scanlan and Theoharis' (2015) understanding of social justice leadership practices that I developed a more robust conceptual framework for this study.

As shared by Scanlan and Theoharis (2015), "One way to parse social justice school leadership is across four outcomes: a) raising student achievement, b) improving school structures, c) re-centering and enhancing staff capacity, and d) strengthening school culture and community" (p. 5). By thinking about academic tracking and acceleration through a socially just school perspective, I am able to understand, frame, and contextualize the "practices – what leaders do – matter most" (p. 6) to lead, influence, and address the politics, pressures, and dynamics of academic tracking and acceleration.

Additionally, the work of Scanlon and Theoharis (2015) centered on fostering communities of practice (COPs) helped me think more deeply about how the leaders within this study engage in social justice leadership work. More specifically, their work helped examine how the leaders share responsibility, purpose, data, expertise and leadership around tracking and acceleration. As highlighted by Scanlan and Theoharis (2015), "We do not learn primarily as isolated individuals. Rather, our learning is powerfully affected by those around us as well as by contextual influences" (p. 7).

In sum, the Oakes (1992), Radd et al. (2021), as well as the Scanlan and Theoharis (2015) frameworks and practices used for this dissertation study assisted me as novice researcher, educator, and social justice leader by providing me with a structure to examine and interrogate leaders' beliefs surrounding academic tracking and PK-12 leadership. More specifically, the frameworks and practices aided me in the creation of my interview and focus group questions (Appendices B, C, D, and E), as well as analysis of my findings. I strategically generated interview and focus group questions that were constructed and categorized around themes from all three pieces of work. The themes centered around equity, tracking and acceleration, change and influence, in addition to decision-making and influence. I utilized excerpts and direct quotations from all of the researchers to guide and provoke my participants thinking and perspectives. Ultimately, the three frameworks and practices helped guide and direct my approach to understanding what we (the field of education) know about tracking, what we know about leadership and tracking, and what we know about regional influence as this dissertation study was conducted.

## **Conclusion**

I make the case and lay the groundwork for this study by suggesting that school leaders play a critical role in establishing, enforcing, and adjusting policies, regulations, and procedures for ensuring equal access, opportunity, and choice for students. More specifically, I argue that leaders have a moral obligation and responsibility to address issues of acceleration and tracking within our middle and secondary schools. In this chapter I shared results from a preliminary study, my personal motivation for engaging in this important work, the significance of the study and statement of the problem, as well as the study's research questions and conceptual framework. In the next few paragraphs, I will outline the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature associated with two literature syntheses. The first synthesis analyzed literature associated to course tracking and acceleration and the second synthesis centered on academic tracking and PK-12 leadership. In Chapter 2 I interrogated my own thoughts, ideas, and perspectives related to course tracking and leadership. Chapter 2 highlights the gaps in the literature. More specifically, the very limited research directly connected to district leadership beliefs and district leadership's work associated to tracking and detracking efforts. Furthermore, there is little to no evidence of literature and studies focused on looking across suburban districts in one geographic region to understand regional ideas, perspectives, pressures, norms, and influences that result in change, action, and equity within middle and high school academic structures.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative research methodology and methods used for this study. I outline the overall strategy and approach for conducting the study, as well as the data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, Chapter 3 contains a section focused on the personal stance as an insider researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation focuses on the first research question and represents findings related to the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration. In this chapter, I represent the district leaders' definitions of tracking and acceleration, compare policies and practices, in addition to organize their district course enrollment and student placement data. The data in this chapter highlights a clear need for change to address all of the equity issues associated with tracking and acceleration because the lived realities of schools do not match the district leaders' words and sediments regarding academic tracking and acceleration in their schools.

Chapter 5 highlights the findings associated with the second research question: How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools? In investigating this research question, I learn that little is done to disrupt tracking. This reality helps to explain why the course enrollment data represented in Chapter 4 highlights oppressive patterns regarding student placement in courses and programming within the school districts.

Chapter 6 responds to the final research question and represents findings on regional influence, pressure, decision-making and change. The data is organized around the influences and pressures the leaders encounter from peers, communities / families, teachers / staff, and Boards of Education. This chapter argues a need and desire for leaders to expand upon the concept of regional collaborations in order to successfully address tracking and acceleration systems in middle and high schools.

The final chapter of the dissertation contains the discussion, implications, and recommendations. It begins with a discussion and analysis of key findings, followed by implications and recommendations for practitioners and leadership preparation programs, and concludes with suggestions for future research and a final reflection. In this chapter, I offer hope that this research will encourage district and building-level leaders to work together across district lines and regions to examine solutions, ignite change, and influence in our nation's schools.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

*“Providing an excellent education for all students is not easy. But tracking is a cop out! To default to a tracked system pretty much ensures that you are denying a high quality of education to the students who are not in the high-track classes.”*  
- Kevin Welner (2022)

### Introduction

Prior to this study, no literature existed regarding the impact of regional influence and effort of school district leaders when examining academic tracking and acceleration systems. As a result, the literature used to ground and frame this dissertation study, resulted in analysis of literature through two literature syntheses.

The first synthesis was framed on the premise that school systems and districts have profound influences on students which perpetuates systems of both oppression and privilege. That being specified, the literature synthesis analyzed the literature associated to course tracking and acceleration by framing arguments around three (3) themes: Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps, Democracy; Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies, Accountability; and Disrupting Tracking. As the synthesis emerged, it become evident that all three themes relating to tracking, acceleration, and course stratification influences equity, access, and choice for all students.

The second synthesis was framed with the understanding that school systems, leaders, teachers, other professionals effect student experiences, learning, and growth which is essential to understanding the complex, diverse, and dynamic practice of academic tracking. That being specified, it was the intent of the literature synthesis to analyze the literature associated with

academic tracking and PK-12 leadership by framing arguments / analysis around three (3) categories / themes: understanding / defining tracking; benefits and problems of tracking; leadership and tracking. For this analysis I use Oakes' (1992) tracking reform framework. As this synthesis developed, it became evident that PK-12 leadership must understand the complexity of academic tracking from the technical, normative, and political perspectives if consideration is given to reforming student experiences and ensuring equity, access, and achievement for all students.

As a result of examining both literature syntheses, this more comprehensive literature review as part of the dissertation study has been structured using the following major headings: 1) Introduction, 2) Methods of Literature Synthesis, 3) Analysis of Literature (Foundational Terms within the Literature, History of Tracking, Dimensions of Tracking, Perceived Benefits / Positive View of Tracking, The Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps, and Democracy, Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies, Accountability, Disrupting Tracking, and Leadership, Equity, and Tracking), and 4) Conclusion. Ultimately, this structure will help organize the body of literature which grounds this dissertation study, as well as highlights gaps for additional research and study.

### **Method for Literature Synthesis**

Since equity, access, and opportunity are critical factors in providing high quality academic curriculums to all students, the first literature synthesis addressed the following research question: What are the influences described within the literature on tracking, course acceleration, and stratification that positively and negatively influence equity, access, and choice for students? Meanwhile, for the reason that it is important to have a strong understanding of academic tracking, as well as historical, structural, and institutional systems educational leaders

face in addressing equity, access, and opportunity to high quality curriculums for all students, the second literature synthesis addressed the following research questions: What does the field know about tracking? and What does the field know about leadership and tracking?

To begin the task of answering the research questions for both literature reviews, I gathered and reviewed literature focused on tracking and acceleration, as well as tracking and leadership. The literature searches conducted through Syracuse University Library's databases for educational research included academic articles, position papers, books, as well as qualitative and quantitative studies. The gathering of sources included both theoretical and empirical publications from the following databases: ERIC (EBSCO) – Educational Resources Information Center, JSTOR – Journal Storage, ProQuest, and SAGE Knowledge.

The search terms used for gathering the first literature synthesis were the following: 1) tracking and course acceleration in schools 2) de-tracking in education 3) de-tracking America's schools and 4) tracking. Similarly, the search terms used for gathering the literature for the second review were the following: 1) tracking and course acceleration in schools 2) leadership and tracking in schools 3) leadership and de-tracking in schools 4) principals and tracking 5) principals and de-tracking 6) tracking and conceptual framework and 7) academic tracking in schools.

For both reviews, emphasis was placed on the primary work of Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, 2008), as well as Burris (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) and their colleagues to help guide and narrow the scope of literature. Both researchers were often cited within the body of literature, and from my perspective, considered revered experts, as researchers and practitioners, of tracking, acceleration, and course stratification within the field of PK-12 education.



Following the gathering of the literature, the sources were reviewed, analyzed, and arranged into an organized document. The framework/structure of the organized document allowed information to be gathered into the following categories: type of publication, design and method of research question(s) or framework, as well as key findings, terminology, information, and understandings of tracking, acceleration, and course stratification. Once pertinent information was placed within the document, the next step resulted in the sorting and coding of literature to help frame the arguments of the syntheses.

As a result, the first literature synthesis was centered on addressing the following research questions:

- How does tracking, course acceleration, ability grouping, and curricular stratification influence student achievement, access, and choice?
- How does policy influence tracking and course acceleration?
- How do school cultures and structures influence tracking and course acceleration?
- What are the effects of teacher and leader influence on tracking and course acceleration?

In an attempt to address the questions listed above, the following themes, which ground the synthesis, emerged from the literature:

- The Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps, Democracy
- Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies, Accountability
- Disrupting Tracking

As a result of the organization of data, the second literature synthesis is centered on addressing the following research questions:

- What does the field know about the history of tracking?

- What are the problems and benefits of tracking?
- What do K-12 leaders say about tracking?
- How do K-12 leaders address tracking?

In an attempt to address the questions listed above, the following categories and themes, which ground this synthesis, emerged from the literature:

- History of Tracking
- Dimensions of Tracking
- Benefits of Tracking
- Problems with Tracking
- How does Leadership Address Tracking?

In total, 124 sources of literature on tracking, acceleration, course stratification, and leadership were reviewed and 79 sources were cited within this literature review.

### **Analysis of Literature**

The analysis of the theoretical and empirical literature on academic tracking, acceleration, and leadership is structure within this chapter using the following headings: Foundational Terminology; History of Tracking; Dimensions of Tracking; The Perceived Benefits / Positive View of Tracking; The Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps, Stereotyping, Marginalization and Democracy; Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies and Accountability; Disrupting Tracking; and Leadership, Equity, and Tracking. As presented, I begin this analysis by helping readers of this study develop a foundational understanding of key words and terminology associated with academic tracking and acceleration as found in the current body of literature. Next, I provide a brief historical overview of tracking, from its formalized inception to current status in PK-12 schools. Lastly, I organize the literature around

the various themes which emerged from the synthesis searches which ultimately frame and ground this research study.

### **Foundational Terms within the Literature**

The discussion surrounding academic tracking and the acceleration of students through systems of access, opportunity, and achievement, can best be understood having knowledge of foundational terminology within the literature. Specifically, the concepts of tracking, ability grouping, course acceleration, curricular stratification, and de-tracking provide a context for understanding the broader significance of equity, access, and achievement for students within our PK-12 schools.

*Tracking* is centered on the notion that schools assign students to stratified levels of a course or curriculum that is different, less or more rigorous, than the standard course and curriculum (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). In essence, tracking is a system of separating students by academic ability into groups for all subjects or certain classes and curriculums within a school (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Cantu, 2019; Chmielewski, 2014; Domina, McEachin, Hanselman, Agarwal, Hwang, & Lewis, 2019; Epple, Newlon, & Romano, 2002; Furuta, 2020; Gamoran, 1990, 2009; Hallinan, 1994; Karlson, 2015; Kruse, 2019; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Lucas, 1999, 2001; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon & Marsh, 2016; Reed, 2008; Rubin, 2006; Venkatakrishnan, & Wiliam, 2003; Wells & Oakes, 1996, 1998; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 1996; Zimmer, 2003).

*Ability Grouping* is best defined through the work of Domina et al. (2019) as “sorting students across learning environments according to their measured skills” (p. 297) and observed characteristics. Therefore, in short, *ability grouping* can be defined or summarized by

the following words: sorting or separating students within classes, courses, or curriculums (Burris, Welner & Bezoya, 2009; Chiu, Beru, Watley, Wubu, Simson, Kessinger & Wigfield, 2008; Domina, McEachin, Hanselman, Agarwal, Hwang & Lewis, 2019; Epple, Newlon, & Romano, 2002; Kruse, 2019; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon & Marsh, 2016; Wells & Oakes, 1996; Rubin, 2006; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016; Venkatakrisnan & Wiliam, 2003; Wells & Oakes, 1996; Zimmer, 2003).

*Course Acceleration* is appropriately well-defined as students taking a course at one grade or more challenging course level while they receive simultaneous credit for an equivalent course at a higher grade or course level (Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2004, 2006; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, 2007, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoya, 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Clotfelter, Ladd & Vigdor, 2015; Domina, Hanselman, Hwang, McEachin, 2016; Domina, Penner, Penner & Conley, 2014; Domina, McEachin, Penner & Penner, 2015; Dougherty, Goodman, Hill, Litke & Page, 2015, 2017; Marsh, 2016; Martinez, 2018; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Probst, 2019; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016; Xu, Fink, & Solanki, 2019). For example, a student may take algebra at the middle school, and earn credit at both the middle school and high school level. Similarly, a student may take living environment or biology in eighth grade and receive high school credit for successful completion of the course. Additionally, it is common that students take accelerated courses to free up time in their high school schedules to enroll in college-level and Advanced Placement (AP) credits, compete for and improve their class rank, enhance their transcripts for college acceptance, and to take courses that allow for advance diploma designations.

*Course Stratification* refers to the degree to which students are selected or placed into separate learning pathways with clearly differentiated curriculums (e.g., academic versus vocational tracks or pathways, basic versus advance placement or college-level) (Archbald & Keleher, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezosa, 2009; Domina, Hanselman, Hwang & McEachin, 2016; Domina & Saldana, 2012; Furuta, 2020; Lucas, 1999; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 2008; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon & Marsh, 2016; Sampson, 2019; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

*De-tracking* as it relates to schools and equity is a movement focusing on changes within policies, practices, and regulations of course tracking and stratification (Burris et al., 2005, 2008, 2009). More specifically, de-tracking is the heterogeneously grouping of students into courses/classes allowing access to high quality, rigorous curriculums when tracks are often only available to few students based on ability and the use of differentiation and self-learning curriculum (Abiola, 2016; Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Argys, Rees & Brewer, 1996; Atteberry, Lacour, Burris, Welner & Murphy, 2019; Brewer, Rees & Argys, 1995; Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Wiley, Welner & Murphy, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezosa, 2009; Domina, Hanselman, Hwang & McEachin, 2016; Domina, McEachin, Hanselman, Agarwal, Hwang & Lewis, 2019; Domina, Penner, Penner, & Conley, 2014; Domina, McEachin, Penner & Penner, 2015; Hallinan, 2004; Oakes, 2008; Oakes & Lipton, 1992; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Rosenbaum, 1999; Rubin 2003, 2006; Slavin, 1995; Wells & Oakes 1996, 1998; Welner & Burris, 2006; Wheelock, 1992; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 1996).

It is evident based on the definitions of key terminology within the literature that words are often used interchangeably. Ultimately, the majority (ability grouping, course acceleration, course stratification) all fall under the umbrella term of tracking (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008;

Gamoran, 1990, 2009). When school leaders, teachers, and other educators think about, define, or internalize what they know about academic tracking – whether it be their overall understanding, how they use the knowledge to advocate change, or how they respond to academic or institutional practices and policies, they do so knowing academic tracking and other related terminology are used interchangeable. As such, a clear foundational understanding of all terminology for leaders, teachers, and other educators makes it easier to comprehend, argue, and understand when advocating change.

Within this proposed dissertation study, I will use the universal term of tracking to encompass ability grouping, acceleration, and course stratification. Additionally, I highlight tracking for this proposal mainly through journal articles, research, and studies related to acceleration and course stratification. Furthermore, through a critical lens as a school leader, I will try to demonstrate how what we know about tracking influences, not only my daily work, but also the daily work of all school leaders interested in change.

Having now developed a deeper understanding of the key terminology associated to academic tracking and acceleration of students, the literature review will transition to outlining the history of academic tracking. More specifically, a historical timeline of critical points within PK-12 schools and our nation's history will set the stage for deliberation.

## **History of Tracking**

Academic tracking has existed for over a century as educators and researchers have argued the benefits and disadvantages of placing students into tracks, courses, classes, and groups based on skills, as well as teacher perceived strengths and abilities (Gamoran, 1990, 2009; Oakes, 1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008). As articulated by Gamoran (2009) and Oakes (2005), the educational practice of tracking, as a universal term incorporating acceleration,

ability grouping, and curricular stratification, was intended and/or grounded in principles as a systematic method to create efficiency in the school experience so that educators could enhance instruction for groups of students.

According to Lockwood and Cleveland (1998), as well as Loveless (2013) tracking dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when IQ testing was used to sort and select military officers. The practice of exam-based selection transitioned to high schools and became a common practice within the United States. The sorting of students centered on the premise that our economy and country needed workers with varying skillsets and knowledge. According to Loveless (2013), the sorting and selecting of students into tracks within the school experience based on academic testing became known and “enshrined as the American model” (p. 14).

By the 1950s and 1960s, the *Brown vs. Board of Education* of Topeka decision, along with political and civil rights movements, amplified American schools’ use of testing to sort, select, segregate, and track students (Lockwood & Cleveland, 1998). As such, by the 1970s and early 1980s, tracking, as a universal policy for grouping and sorting students for educational purposes and economic success, was beginning to be viewed/categorized as controversial, ineffective, and insufficient at meeting the equal opportunity needs of students, in addition to maintaining competition in our global world (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Furata, 2020; Oakes, 2005).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, tracking critics like Oakes and Gamoran began highlighting the problems and inequities associated with tracking which resulted in a strong condemning of educational policies and practices which support tracking and ability grouping in schools (Lockwood & Cleveland, 1998; Loveless, 2013). As a result of the work of critics, research studies and data, the National Governors Association, along with other major political

organizations, began condemning the use of tracking in schools which resulted in states, like California and Massachusetts implementing detracking movements (Hallinan, 2006).

By the 2000s, educational leaders and researchers like Burris and colleagues began highlighting, as well as examining practical detracking efforts within our nation's schools. During that time, many studies made evident the importance of equal access to curriculum for students. According to Burris, Welner and Bezozo (2009):

The past decade, has given rise to a new generation of de-tracking efforts, informed by the past research studies as well as the work of earlier reformers. These recent efforts have found greater success, and the study of these heterogeneous classrooms and schools – where all students are taught a challenging, common curriculum – provides valuable insights. (p. 2)

Furthermore, while states like California and Minnesota have led efforts to detrack curriculum and course offerings within middle and secondary schools, states like New York have been slow to create change (Loveless, 2009). That stated, the most notable New York State school system to generate transformation in student experiences due to detracking efforts is the Rockville Centre School District (Burris, 2010). Rockville Centre's detracking efforts within a very traditional and structured New York State Board of Regents bureaucracy is evidence that positive change is possible when passionate leaders work together to enhance the learning opportunities for all students. Ultimately, while detracking efforts have proven successful, our nation's schools continue to fight the longstanding norms, belief systems, resilience, and structures associated to academic tracking with PK-12 schools.

Following the historical view associated with academic tracking and acceleration of students, the literature review will transition to highlighting the dimensions of academic tracking.



More specifically, the dimensions of tracking framework will be used to represent academic tracking as a unique and complex phenomenon.

### **Dimensions of Tracking**

In a recent study by Domina et al. (2019), researchers took their understanding of tracking as “an array of school-level processes related to the provision of differentiated academic course work and the allocation of students among the available courses” (p. 92) to develop a framework for understanding, analyzing, and measuring school tracking systems. Their work resulted in further insight into how school tracking systems influence student academic achievement and reproduce inequity among students. More specifically, the dimensions of tracking framework as articulated by Domina et al. (2019) considers the following: 1) degree of curricular differentiation 2) classroom skills homogeneity (ability grouping), 3) track exclusiveness 4) track stability and 5) track scope.

Regarding the degree of curricular differentiation, like Oakes (1992), Domina et al. (2019) describes access to knowledge through curricular differentiation as “providing students with various learning environments in which they are exposed to different bodies of knowledge” (p. 296) horizontally and vertically “by creating different learning environments that expose students to similar bodies of knowledge but at different paces, with different levels of rigor, or with different degrees of social status” (p. 297). This distinction results in an understanding that schools with large quantities of course offerings have a high degree of differentiation and schools with small quantities of course offerings have a low degree of differentiation. Domina et al.’s (2019) degree of curricular differentiation is what Oakes (1992) refers to as the technical dimension of tracking – “a division of knowledge and teaching strategies into programs or

classes” (p. 17). As a school leader, it is essential to know the degree of curricular differentiation within your school and/or organization.

Classroom skills homogeneity (ability grouping) refers to the assignment of students within courses based on characteristics like teacher recommendation, prior course success/achievement, parent, teacher, and student preference, in addition to informal untracked pathways which develop because of a lack of resources, scheduling and staff constraints (Domina et al., 2019). Using Oakes’ (1992) framework, classroom skills homogeneity would primarily fall within the normative dimension of tracking and reform since the assignment of students is based on characteristics which can mostly be associated to beliefs or “firmly rooted in longstanding and deeply felt norms” (p. 18). That being stated, classroom skills homogeneity, when based on lack of resources, scheduling and/or staff constraints, may fall within Oakes’ (1992) technical dimension because a lack of resources, scheduling, and staff constraints are all results based on how school resources are distributed, which is a technical implication.

Track exclusiveness refers to “the extent to which (schools) expose students to high-level academic curriculums” (Domina et al., 2019, p. 298). This concept is primarily situated within Oakes’ (1992) technical dimension of tracking and reform; however, because of the efforts of many U.S. schools to address intensification of academic curriculum through policy and accountability measures, one could argue that track exclusiveness shares a connection to the political dimension. As we understand today, because of policy, many schools “enroll all students in courses previously reserved for relatively high-achieving students; other schools allocate relatively advanced or academically rigorous instruction to some students and less advanced and rigorous instruction to others” (Domina et al., 2019, p. 298).

According to Domina et al. (2019) track stability and track scope are the degree to which tracking structures allow for students to move between tracks and alter their pathway (i.e., vocational, general, college preparatory) or scope of study. Based on research from Oakes (1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008) and Gamoran (1990, 2009), we know when students are placed into a designated track or scope they are sent on a trajectory that is very difficult to adjust/alter. Ultimately, Oakes, Joseph, and Muir (2004) contend that “tracking influences students’ access to various courses and thereby their exposure to curriculum knowledge, their classroom learning experiences, and their learning outcomes” (p. 82). As such, altering stability and scope become inconsequential for most students impacted by academic tracking practices and placements.

Through the dimensions of tracking framework of Domina et al. (2019) and Oakes’ (1992) dimensions of tracking reform, educators, practitioners, leaders, and researchers have solid frameworks to better understand and consider academic tracking as a complex and dynamic practice. That being stated, it is evident that tracking is not an orderly phenomenon. As such, it is multidimensional and requires careful consideration to address the political, normative, and technical resistance created as tracking practices are accumulated, debated, rejected, and reformed.

Following the review of the dimensions of tracking framework, I transition to highlighting some of the perceived benefits, or what advocates of academic tracking consider to be the positive components / outcomes of tracking.

### **The Perceived Benefits / Positive View of Tracking**

Research and academic literature suggest that educational, leaders, teachers, and practitioners assume that academic tracking promotes and enhances a student’s ability to learn effectively when they are grouped with peers with similar ability, prior experiences, and level of

achievement (Oakes, 1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008). Using this assumption, we know from Gamoran (1989) that proponents of tracking argue productivity and efficiency are increased when students are placed into the homogeneous learning environments often associated with academic tracking. Furthermore, when students are placed into tracked systems, they are likely to feel less alienated from the emotional pressures put in place from peers with higher ability, experience, and achievement levels (Oakes, 1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008; Gamoran, 1990, 2009). As described by Oakes (1987), most teachers and school leaders who support academic tracking argue “homogeneous grouping greatly eases the teaching task” (p. 5) resulting in more effective and successful whole class or group instruction organized around specific learning goals, objectives, and curriculum content.

Within this section of the literature synthesis / review, the focus will be placed on the perceived benefits / positive view of tracking. More specifically, the perceived benefits associated with tracking will be highlighted using the following subcategories: tracking creates a commensurate curriculum based on abilities, tracking creates individual learning pathways, and tracking promotes and protects healthy competition.

### ***Tracking creates a commensurate curriculum based on abilities***

When examining academic tracking as a practice that surrounds students with peers with similar academic proficiencies and capacities, practitioners and proponents contend that students learn better. As articulated by Oakes (1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008), practitioners assume that tracking promotes achievement when students are grouped with students with similar ability levels. For example, when high performing students are grouped based on ability level, they are able to receive instruction that is rigorous and fast-paced, this preventing boredom. This condition provides an opportunity for students to experience high-level challenges and

engagement without interruption from other peers. Similarly, it is argued that low-performing students are more confident and exhibit a better sense of self when they receive instruction that is at their level.

Using Oakes' (1992) dimensions of tracking and reform framework, understanding personal beliefs, experiences, and perspectives play a significant role to maintaining the deep-rooted norms that align with commensurate and ability-based curriculums. While the technical action of designing ability-based curriculums is a foundational practice by proponents of tracking, the most significant and influential justification for tracking centers on the normative dimension as systems and structures are established to accommodate differences among students.

### ***Tracking creates individual learning pathways***

Many practitioners believe that addressing the individual learning needs of students can be a daunting task. Research, personal experiences, and knowledge of teaching and learning highlight the fact that all students learn in slightly different ways. As a method to make more efficient and convenient for teachers, Oakes (1986, 1987, 1992, 2005, 2008) suggests that advocates of academic tracking believe that tracking presents a curriculum for each student that aligns with their specific abilities and needs. More specifically, it is believed that academic tracking facilitates personalized learning because teachers are able to “accommodate individual differences in homogenous groups (Oakes, 2005, p.7). Ultimately, since “teachers and administrators contend that homogenous grouping greatly eases the teaching task” (Oakes, 1987, p. 5), instruction becomes streamlined creating learning pathways that ensure all students receive the attention and support they need to reach their full potential.

Proponents know that tracking matters because of practitioners' beliefs about addressing the individual needs of students. According to Rubin (2006), “tracking was originally developed

to provide a more tailored educational experience for the benefit of all students” (p. 5). Using Oakes’ (1992) dimensions of tracking and reform framework, understanding that creating individual learning pathways for students is a technical action or consideration based on a normative belief helps to clarify how this perceived benefit of tracking is positioned for debate. In so much, the process of academic tracking allows for highly gifted students to receive personalized instruction in advanced level classes while accommodating struggling learners through personalized supports in low-tracked classes.

### ***Tracking protects and promotes healthy competition***

Another normative consideration of academic tracking is that it affords students the ability to engage in healthy competition. Because curriculums in a tracked system are designed to meet the individual needs of students, and since they are structured homogenously, like motivated students are able to compete and challenge personal performance and overall achievement. Again, according to Oakes (2005), it is believed that proponents of tracking support ability grouping because it allows students with similar skills and characteristics to learn better, as well as challenge themselves and like-minded peers to perform at higher levels.

Having now developed a deeper understanding of the perceived benefits / positive view of tracking, I now outline the results or problems with tracking. More specifically, the information provided within this section will amplify the need for socially just and equity focused leaders to advocate and implement change for the benefits of all students.

### **The Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps, Stereotyping, Marginalization, Democracy**

The debate surrounding tracking has existed for close to a century as educators and researchers have argued the benefits and disadvantages of placing students into tracks, courses,

classes, and groups based on skills, as well as teacher perceived strengths and abilities (Gamoran 1990, 2009; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). As articulated by Gamoran (2009) and Oakes (2005), the educational practice of tracking, as a universal term incorporating acceleration, ability grouping, and curricular stratification, was intended and/or grounded in principles as a systematic method to create efficiency in the school experience so that teachers could enhance instruction for groups of students.

As argued by Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2017, 2008), Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009), tracking has been criticized for creating inequities within the schooling experiences of students. More specifically, it is argued that students falling within high track courses and sequences or pathways are provided experiences and access to high quality curriculums, which in essence are unlike the experiences of other students, those often marginalized, disadvantaged, and oppressed members of low-track classes, courses, and learning pathways (Oakes, 1986, 19982, 2005, 2008).

Critics of academic tracking highlight the inequalities that exist when educational systems and structures create systemic failures and conflicts for our nation's students. As highlighted by Linda Darling Hammond (2010),

Unequal access to knowledge is structured in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In U.S. schools, far more than those in high achieving nations around the world, this occurs through allocation of different programmatic and course taking opportunities to different students very early in their school experience. Sorting and tracking often begin as early as kindergarten or 1st grade, with decisions about which students will be placed in remedial or gifted programs and with differentials among affluent and poor schools in what is offered. (p. 51-52)

Within this section of the literature review, the focus will be placed on the problems associated to academic tracking. More specifically, the problems associated with tracking will be highlighted using the following subcategories: tracking creates inequity, tracking creates unequal educational experiences, tracking creates opportunity gaps, tracking reinforces stereotyping and marginalization, tracking has a negative socio-emotional impact on students, and tracking threatens democracy.

### ***Tracking Creates Inequity***

Many findings within studies highlight the connection tracking has on students, specifically students of color, economically disadvantaged, and with disabilities. Tracking creates inequity. Students categorized as disadvantaged through various social constructs often find themselves in remedial and low-tracked pathways resulting in gaps within their academic achievement. Furthermore, research suggests that schools' structural differences when examined through equity sway the impact tracking has on student achievement (Burris, Welner & Bezoza; 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Oaks, Joseph, & Muir, 2004; Rubin 2006; Welner & Burris 2006; Wheelock, 1992).

In studies conducted and articles written by Alvarez and Mehan (2006), Burris and Garrity (2008), Rubin (2006), Welner and Burris (2006), Wheelock (1992) and Yonezawa and Jones (2006) it is clear that equity becomes a driving force for change within tracking systems. Specifically, Yonezawa and Jones (2006) highlight the impact societal norms have on student learning, as well as emphasis on competition. In a tracked system, privilege, bias, and marginalization occur through fault of competition, which fuels the equity debate. As articulated through the work of Oakes (1992, 2005), long-standing beliefs about ability and difference become normative challenges which impact equity within PK-12 classrooms.



Tracking restricts fairness and opportunity within educational settings, both of which are foundational components of equity. Within most studies requesting examination of tracking practices and implementation of de-tracking policies and procedures, personal and social circumstances, in addition to identities becoming obstacles in achievement of academic skills (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Brewer et al., 1995; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Rubin, 2006; Welner & Burris, 2006; Wheelock, 1992; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

### ***Tracking Creates Unequal Educational Experiences***

Many findings within studies highlight the fact that tracking systems encourage and promote segregation and differences in educational experiences within schools. Tracking creates inequity. Students in high-level and rigorous curriculums (advanced courses) have access to high quality curriculums and challenging experiences which drive student achievement and performance much unlike the experiences and achievement of low tracked peers (Burris, Welner & Bezosa; 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Oakes, 1986, 1987, 1982, 2005, 2008; Oaks, Joseph, & Muir, 2004; Rubin 2006; Welner & Burris 2006; Wheelock, 1992). According to Oakes (1986, 1987, 1982, 2005, 2008), data gathered in multiple academic tracking studies found remarkable differences in curriculum content, instructional quality, and classroom climate. More specifically, access to knowledge, opportunities to learn, positive and productive classroom climates were drastically different for students placed in high-level coursework, as opposed to students in remedial or low-level pathways. When examining access to knowledge more closely, researchers learned that expectations to enhance and engage in high level skills like critical examination and analysis were embedded within high-track classes and courses while remedial and foundational skills served as the focus for low-track classes and courses.

Opportunities to learn when examining teaching quality and instructional time is different between low and high tracked classes. More specifically, Oakes (1986) found that “students in high tracks get more (time); students in low tracks get less (time)” (p. 16). Furthermore, teachers instructing in high track classes were found to be more knowledgeable, enthusiastic, organized, and focused on student learning. As shared by Lockwood and Cleveland (1998), low track classes deny students access to highly qualified teachers, classroom environments, and curriculums that prepare students for college and career.

Productive classroom environments are essential to student growth, achievement, and learning. As shared by Oakes (1986), “When teachers and students trust one another, classroom time and energy are freed for teaching and learning” (p. 16). In studies and analysis conducted by Oakes (1986, 2005), researchers and practitioners confirmed beliefs that high track classes have less punitive, more focused, and productive classroom environments as opposed to low track and remedial classes. This confirmation amplifies the unequal experiences of students in tracked educational systems.

In an effort to understand tracking as a structure that creates unequal educational experiences, it is important to position the creation of inequality through the technical dimension / lens of tracking reform. It is evident that curriculum, instruction, environment, and resources can all be addressed by understanding the technical dimensions of tracking. As such, while rather trivial and straightforward, it requires an understanding of “well-grounded guidance about how schools gain capacity to develop, adapt, and implement the array of new techniques in ways appropriate to their particular context” (Oakes, 1992, p. 18) if resistance can be overwhelmed by positive and productive change.

### ***Tracking Creates Opportunity Gaps***

There are different rates of success and achievement among students not based on individual or inherent strengths or qualities. Over decades, the differences in academic achievement have grown wider; the two most likely factors in achievement being race and socio-economic status. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) referencing the National Governors' Association writes, "The achievement gap is a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic achievement persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts" (p. 3). Examples like this exemplify how tracking creates opportunity gaps for students.

Similarly, *Education Week* (2019) published the latest SAT college admissions test results, which continue to highlight the achievement gap between students (gender and race). Specifically, Asian students followed by white students' averaged scores on the examination resulted in 75% and 57%, respectively, meeting higher education / college-ready benchmarks. Latino, Black, Pacific Islander, and Native American students demonstrated meeting significantly less college readiness standards with 29%, 20%, 27%, and 18% respectively. This represents a significant difference in the preparedness, as well as future opportunities, for students. By ignoring these discrepancies, which occur through tracked, accelerated, or stratified course systems, educators are perpetuating systemic racism and oppression.

While data suggests that race has a significant influence on achievement, analysis, according to Samuels (2019) suggests that poverty fuels the achievement gap. Specifically, "high-poverty schools provide fewer opportunities than schools that are more affluent" (p. 5). Many of these schools offer fewer opportunities, if any, for specialized areas of study, including college-level, Advanced Placement, and exploratory courses, as well as academic and social-emotional supports. Similarly, Colgren and Sappington (2015) through analysis of a major cross-

sectional survey examined the differences in achievement on ACT scores when looking across course rigor and access to advanced-level course opportunities. Their work highlights key factors that there are differences in achievement, more so for students depending on race and income level, even when controlled by student placement into AP or other rigorous coursework. As such, we can conclude that gaps in performance still exist for students. Furthermore, traditional schooling, which includes tracking, acceleration, and course stratification, benefits white and non-low-income students. Colgren and Sappington (2015) suggest that this highlights the need for equitable opportunities to participate in advanced level/rigorous course curriculums to improve academic achievement for all students.

The intersectionality of race and socio-economic status are so intricately interwoven that it is difficult to recognize where schools have the greatest ability to invigorate change and develop a course of action for improvement within course tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students. Research from Delpit (2012), targets both “poverty and/or racism create conditions” (p. 5) which make it challenging for children within schools to overcome inequities. This work highlights the intersection of both race and socio-economic status as a system of difference to understanding the oppressions connected to our schools’ achievement gap. While, Samuels (2019) articulates the educational injustice of our achievement gap, as “it is more accurate to call it a poverty gap” (p. 5), Delpit (2012) describes our students’ lack of performance, specifically, poor African American students, because of a lack of instruction. She writes, “Our tendency is to teach less, to teach down, to teach for remediation” (p. 6) which places full responsibility of addressing achievement on students and/or their families. This instructional practice helps categorize or define the tracking of students (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Cantu, 2019; Chmielewski, 2014; Domina, McEachin, Hanselman, Agarwal, Hwang, & Lewis,

2019; Epple, Newlon, & Romano, 2002; Furuta, 2020; Gamoran, 1990, 2009; Hallinan, 1994; Karlson, 2015; Kruse, 2019; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003; Lucas, 1999, 2001; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Parker, Jerrim, Schoon & Marsh, 2016; Reed, 2008; Rubin, 2006; Venkatakrisnan, & Wiliam, 2003; Wells & Oakes, 1996, 1998; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 1996; Zimmer, 2003).

Thus, the influences of tracking on academic achievement becomes a priority for teachers and leaders to educate and/or guide communities of stakeholders toward equal opportunities and access for all students ensuring gaps in performance are eliminated (Burris, 2010; Oakes, 1986). Ultimately, a focus on the technical, normative, and political dimensions of tracking can help address opportunity gaps associated with tracking.

### ***Tracking reinforces stereotyping and marginalization***

As strong critics of academic tracking, Oakes (1992), as well as Gamoran and Mare (1989) suggest that tracking reinforces the establishment of low performance expectations for students producing large academic and post school inequalities. In addition, track placement is predicated on social factors (e.g., race, sex, socioeconomic status, class, ability) which widen the performance gap and enhance the potential stigma associated to student placement in low-track classes. As such, low-track and remedial classes are often comprised of students categorized as disadvantaged, minority, and low-income (Burris, Welner & Bezozza; 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Oaks, Joseph, & Muir, 2004; Rubin 2006; Welner & Burris 2006; Wheelock, 1992).

As argued by Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2017, 2008), Burris, Welner and Bezozza (2009), tracking has been criticized for creating inequities within the schooling experiences of students by instilling class and societal values. More specifically, it is argued that

students falling within high track courses and sequences or pathways are provided experiences and access to high quality curriculums as high-achievers and gifted students. This action, in essence, is unlike the experiences and categorization of other students, often referred to as remedial, underachieving, or at-risk students who are placed in low-track classes, courses, and learning pathways (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008).

Yonezawa and Jones (2006) highlight the impact societal norms have on student learning, as well as how competition reinforces stereotyping and marginalization. In a tracked system, privilege, bias, and marginalization occur through fault of competition, which fuels the equity debate and reinforces inequity among students. As articulated through the work of Oakes (1992, 2005), long-standing educator beliefs about ability and difference become normative challenges which impact equity within PK-12 classrooms. As such, low track students are often discouraged and/or prevented from engaging in advance level coursework by teachers, counselors, and other education professionals.

In summary, students tend to perform to the level their teachers expect, no matter whether those expectations are high or low. This is problematic because some teachers may set lower performance expectations for students from historically marginalized groups. As such, these students may miss out on opportunities for growth, achievement, and academic success.

### ***Tracking has a negative socio-emotional impact on students***

In a study conducted by Chiu et al. (2008), researchers examined how tracking influences students' achievement and socio-emotional characteristics like self-concept and self-esteem. Based on findings, high-track students demonstrated significantly higher self-concept or confidence than low-tracked students. Similarly, when comparing the self-esteem of students

among tracks, it becomes evident that students' perceptions of themselves are positive within a high-track setting, as opposed to negative in a low-track setting.

Educators must think about how normative actions, beliefs, and perceptions impact students. As shared by Oakes (1992), low-tracked students are often alienated resulting in a negative effect on attitudes of success and achievement. Furthermore, this results in systems of tracking having significant influence on "attainment and life changes, over and above their [student] achievement" (p. 13). Ultimately, educators and other practitioners "should think about why students in low level academic tracks received lower grades and how the negative effects that these lower grades may have on these students' self-concept and motivation to do well in school" (Chiu et al., 2008, p. 133).

In summary, we know self-esteem and self-concept are crucial to the social-emotional well-being of students. Students in low-track courses and classes receive negative attention which impacts social integration. As shared by Rubin and Noguera (2004), low achieving students "receive more negative attention from the teacher and become identified by their peers as the kids who 'don't want to work'. Such students tend to be avoided as partners for group work" (p. 94). Similarly, Oakes (1987) describes student self-esteem and self-concept as they relate to tracking by highlighting, "clearly, student ability, prior achievement, self-expectations, and interests differ among students, and these differences influence students' initial skill level and shape the ease with which they learn" (p. 11). Therefore, as leaders, educators, and practitioners it is important to understand that tracking has a negative socio-emotional impact on students. New norms must be established to meet the needs of students and ensure deep rooted pressures, beliefs, and perspectives are reformed (Oakes, 1992).

### ***Tracking Threatens Democracy***

Researchers and practitioners like Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, 2008) and Burris and Garrity (2008) argue schooling or educating in democratic ways should provide equal access, opportunity, and choice for students. Understanding the “hard work, courage, vigilance, and a willingness to challenge commonly held assumptions about students’ capacity to learn” (Burris & Garrity, 2008, p. 50) are what makes reform within our schools truly democratic. Inasmuch as democracy can lead to unity, reform to address course tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students must be united from the top to the bottom of an organization or institution in order to yield equitable change (Oakes & Lipton, 1992; Burris & Garrity, 2008). As Oakes and Lipton (1992) describe,

Tracking is entrenched; sensible alternatives are complex, sometimes counterintuitive, and often controversial. Even when alternatives emerge from an inclusive and democratic process of inquiry and experimentation, steering the process of de-tracking through the inevitable troubled waters of school and community politics calls for strong leaders who unequivocally and unambiguously – if gently – assert the research, theory and democratic values that support de-tracking. (p. 453)

As described above, schools that engage in a process of inquiry and experimentation, one that is opportunistic, democratic, and sensitive to the needs of the community, can address the political, social, and institutional norms that course tracking, acceleration, and stratification have long reinforced and positioned. Furthermore, addressing tracking through multiple lens is the only way to ensure a true democratic opportunity within schools prevails guaranteeing equity and access for all learners.



Following this section on the results and problems with tracking, the literature review will transition to highlighting the influences that contribute to academic tracking. More specifically, through this section, an understanding of policies and accountability will be shared to assist school leaders, researchers, and other practitioners.

### **Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies and Accountability**

Policies at both the state and local levels, as well as accountability have influence over course tracking, acceleration, and stratification systems. Specifically, analysis associated with this literature synthesis highlights four critical areas of influence - universal policy decisions, open enrollment, reform efforts, and accountability. Burris, Welner, and Bezoza, (2009), contend that the focus of research associated to tracking should shift to implementation and reform by highlighting and recommending policy and practices change. Their work focuses on policy language and implementation, which is critical to ensuring equity, access, and opportunities for students within our PK-12 schools.

In a variety of other studies and writings, researchers like Oakes (1992), contend that tracking, course acceleration, and stratification are so complex and dynamic that school norms regarding course opportunities and placement are intertwined through policy. More specifically, Oakes shares,

Tracking is accompanied by public labels, status differences, expectations, and consequences for academic and occupational attainment. Thus, tracking becomes part and parcel of the struggle among individuals and groups for comparative advantages in the distribution of school resources, opportunities, and credentials that have exchange value in the larger society. (p. 3)

As Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, 2008) and Burris (2010) suggest through their work, policies can positively and negatively influence tracking, acceleration, and course stratification of students.

Within this section of the synthesis, the focus of the literature will be on all of the major areas and influences of our educational system which contribute to tracking. More specifically, the following subcategories: policies influence tracking and accountability influences tracking will be highlighted within this category.

### ***Policies Influence Tracking***

The literature on tracking, course acceleration, and stratification highlights how universal policy decisions, open enrollment practices, and accountability all influence access, opportunity, and choice for students. Specifically, Atteberry et al (2019), Burris et al. (2007, 2008, 2009), Allensworth et al. (2009), Argys et al. (2019), Clotfelter et al. (2015), Domina et al. (2014, 2015), Oakes (1992), Yonezawa and Jones (2006), and Xu, Fink, and Solanki (2019), articulate more clearly how universal policy decisions, including access for all and open enrollment all contribute to tracking within PK-12 school settings. Furthermore, this section of the synthesis will highlight how tracking happens because of policies established by school, as well as other entities.

### **All-encompassing / Universal Actions.**

In a variety of studies and articles by Burris et al (2008), Allensworth et al (2009), Argys et al. (2019), Clotfelter et al. (2015), Domina et al. (2014, 2015), Oakes (1992), and Yonezawa and Jones (2006), we learn that all-encompassing / universal policy actions where broad sweeping decisions are made about the inclusion and placement of all students in courses and curriculums can have positive and negative effects on tracking, course stratification, and acceleration of students. Specifically, Burris et al. (2008), Argys et al. (1996), Atteberry et al.

(2019), Domina et al. (2014, 2015) highlight improved academic performance, elimination of inequities, and curriculum advantages for all students when universal policies eliminate tracking mechanisms and stratification systems. In the studies, researchers and practitioners found that race, class, and skill gaps narrowed when policies were implemented allowing access and opportunity to high-level, rigorous or high track curriculums.

Conversely, Allensworth et al. (2009), Clotfelter et al. (2015), Mickelson and Everett (2008) contend that universal policy decisions ensuring high-level coursework for all students can have less than ideal outcomes for student performance and often exasperate matters of difference between students of varying demographic and social identities. More specifically, the researchers caution practitioners because they found evidence that policies associated to college preparatory pathways and stratifications, along with enrollment in early Algebra instruction, can have significant negative influence on performance creating even more inequality among students when implemented. When policy decisions are not thoughtfully planned, researched, supported, and carefully implemented the resultant becomes significant obstacles and hurdles toward improvement based on the political, structural, historical, and cultural systems of our institutions (Collins, 2013).

While universal policy decisions, in general, influence equity, access and opportunity within course tracking and acceleration systems, it is interesting to frame judgments through the lens of the individuals or entities promoting the policy recommendations. In almost all of the studies reviewed for this synthesis, as highlighted above, adults (e.g., teachers, leaders (principals and superintendents), board members, parents, policy-makers, etc.) played a critical role in developing, implementing, and enforcing the policy decisions.

One study by Yonezawa and Jones (2006) emphasized the role that students can play in advocating and influencing policy makers. The study, which focused on how students make sense of tracking, de-tracking, and equity within schools, highlighted how student beliefs, understandings of meritocracy, and societal norms have a profound influence on their own perceptions of policies related to tracking. Henceforth, resulting in the power to influence, challenge, resist, and accept the recommendations of policy makers.

### **Open Enrollment.**

Open enrollment into course offerings is a policy and/or institutional practice, which influences tracking, acceleration, and course stratification. In studies conducted by Burris et al. (2007, 2009) and Domina et al. (2014, 2016) open enrollment was used to de-track and provide opportunities for all students to access high-level coursework including college preparatory, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate curriculums. In these studies, access was more equitable among demographic and social identities, while performance on assessments remained at, or above, the levels of student performance prior to when open enrollment policies were instituted. One study exception, by Allensworth et al. (2009), highlighted universal open enrollment in a large urban setting resulting in findings that acknowledged no-difference in student performance. Thus, in totality of the studies examined, it can be suggested that when schools offer open enrollment policies and practices that include heterogeneous grouping of students in courses, there is improved performance for all learners and additional positive effects for high achievers (Burris et al., 2007, 2008, 2009; Domina et al., 2014, 2016).

Lastly, in a study conducted by Xu, Fink, and Solanki (2019), district policies and practices surrounding open enrollment for Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment courses, researchers provide evidence that variability of practices across districts and states can

explain the gaps that exist along racial ethnic composition, income disparity, and participation for Black and Latino students when compared to their white counterparts. Ultimately, when school systems create, implement and enforce policies and practices of universal open enrollment, they create opportunity and access for students; however as shared by Burris et al. (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009), Burris (2010), Burris and Welner (2005) student support and sustained professional development for instructional staff members are essential to ensuring equity and success created by the access and opportunities.

### ***Accountability Influences Tracking***

In a variety of studies examining the long-term achievement of students in a demographically diverse high school within New York State, Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2008) found that the de-tracking of students as an institutional, structural, political, and social reform was an effective strategy to guide all students to academic success while meeting high learning standards. The findings are compelling as expectations surrounding accountability require schools to eliminate or close achievement gaps while ensuring equity and access for all students.

Contrary to the success of some studies on tracking, acceleration, and course stratification, Domina, McEachin, Penner, and Penner (2015) found that curriculum policy and intensification for all students as a way to address accountability issues and gaps within academic performance proves less than fruitful for students in at least one large district. More specifically, as they found, attempting to enroll more students in advance courses has negative effects on students' achievement. While the study may be contrary to support others promoting de-tracking and elimination of the stratification of students, it highlights how practitioners should think about as they thoughtfully implement change.

In addition to the two competing conclusions of accountability, a review of research and data regarding access and achievement in mathematics and science by Oaks, Joseph, and Muir (2004) clearly establish tracking as an institutionalized structure that affects access, achievement and learning outcomes for students. Furthermore, their work on tracking and equity brings to light the significantly negative impact course placement of minority students in low-level courses, as opposed to white and Asian students in high-level courses, has on accountability.

Similarly, in a review of North Carolina's Course of Study (COS) Framework which was implemented to address an accountability movement, Mickelson and Everett (2008) found "tracking still presents serious challenges to educators, parents, and policy makers who strive to meet the legal, educational, and moral imperatives to provide an equitable and high-quality education to all students" (p. 536). As verified in the study, the COS framework unintentionally reproduced racial and social class stratification within its learning pathways for students which exacerbated the goals and intentions of accountability.

Following this section on the influences that contribute to tracking: policies, accountability, the literature review will transition to highlighting the disruptions of tracking. More specifically, through this section, an understanding of why there is a need to disrupt tracking will be shared to assist school leaders, researchers, and other practitioners.

### **Disrupting Tracking**

Many studies over recent years have highlighted the importance of equal access to curriculum for students. According to Burris, Welner and Bezozo (2009):

The past decade, has given rise to a new generation of de-tracking efforts, informed by the past research studies as well as the work of earlier reformers. These recent efforts have found greater success, and the study of these heterogeneous classrooms and schools

– where all students are taught a challenging, common curriculum – provides valuable insights. (p. 2)

Similarly, Linda Darling Hammond (2010) examined the way in which our educational system and structures create systemic failures / conflict for our nation's students. She found the following:

Unequal access to knowledge is structured in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In U.S. schools, far more than those in high achieving nations around the world, this occurs through allocation of different programmatic and course taking opportunities to different students very early in their school experience. Sorting and tracking often begin as early as kindergarten or 1st grade, with decisions about which students will be placed in remedial or gifted programs and with differentials among affluent and poor schools in what is offered. (p. 51-52)

While Hammond (2010) and Burris, Welner and Bezozo (2009) rationalize a need for change, Finnian (2018) highlights the importance that school culture and structure have on course tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students. More specifically, Finnian (2018) argues the following societal assumptions influence a culture of learning: 1) individual beliefs adults hold for students, 2) beliefs students hold for themselves, 3) the value of education, 4) perceptions of change, and 5) acceptance to educational practices. In the end, accepting a need or urgency for equal access to high quality curriculums for all students, as well as understanding the influences of school cultures affords practitioners a drive and commitment to cultivate change to tracking systems for the benefit of all students.

As previously indicated, within this section of the synthesis, the focus of the literature is on disrupting tracking. More specifically, the focus will be situated on de-tracking reform.

## ***Detracking Reform***

It is the responsibility of leaders and teachers to break down systems, which have long separated and provided unequal opportunities for students based upon their identities, abilities, and individual circumstances. Examples of structural or programmatic shifts that could have positive effects on opportunities for students include, changing course-level selection processes (Burris, 2010; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009). Because of their influence, school leaders and teachers have a responsibility to disrupt tracking by examining and eliminating policies, practices, as well as procedures that perpetuate inequalities associated with course tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students.

As articulated by Burris (2010), in order to positively influence change toward equitable access to challenging opportunities for all students, leaders must ensure the following: 1) engage in thoughtful study and dialogue with staff and parents on the effects of tracking 2) review and examine patterns within tracking placements 3) investigate whether tracking within a given school system is homogeneous or heterogeneous 4) critically review teaching assignments and patterns and 5) communicate inequities and meritocracy associated with tracking and course placement decisions. Leaders who implement these recommendations and guidelines are able to highlight the connections that course tracking, acceleration, and stratification have on students, specifically students of color, economically disadvantaged, and with disabilities (Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2004, 2006; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, 2007, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009).

As highlighted through a variety of studies, Mickelson and Everett (2008), Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2008), Domina, Hanselman, Hwang, and McEachin (2016), and according to Oaks, Joseph, and Muir (2004), tracking “influence students’ access to various courses and



thereby their exposure to curriculum knowledge, their classroom learning experiences, and their learning outcomes. (p. 82). Since influence is inevitable, it is essential to understand the role teachers have in placement decisions. According to Abiola (2016), Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005), Oakes and Lipton (1992), Pit-en Cate, Krolak-Schwerdt & Glock (2016), Reed (2008), and Wheelock (1992) decisions within a tracked, accelerated, and/or stratified system are grounded on prior student placements decisions based on standardized test scores, performance achievement within current placements, teacher recommendations, perceived work ethic, as well as an ability to fit the mold of a system's desired traits/characteristics. Unfortunately, for school leaders, teachers, and other practitioners, these criteria are often outdated, based on socially constructed notions of desirable student qualities and characteristics, and demonstrate little understanding of cultural differences and academic preparation among students (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). Because teacher influence of placement decisions within tracking systems offers little to no objective data to ensure all students, no matter their race, socioeconomic status, disability, gender, or sexuality receive equal access and opportunity to enroll-in, as well as participate in high-quality curriculums, the resultant outcome negatively influences student access, choice, and opportunities.

Having developed a deeper understanding of the disruption of tracking and detracking reform, I now outline leadership, equity, and tracking. More specifically, the information provided within this section will call to the forefront the need for socially just and equity focused leaders to advocate and implement change for the benefits of all students. Furthermore, this section will focus on the role of leadership in creating equitable schools by addressing tracking.

## **Leadership, Equity, and Tracking**

The influence of course tracking, acceleration, and stratification on access, achievement, and equity continues to draw the significant attention of researchers and educators alike. Socially just school leaders understand the impact curriculum offerings and pathways constructed by academic tracking have on student outcomes. Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) suggest,

Socially just schooling is evident when educational opportunities abound for all students, when ambitious academic goals are held and met by all students, when all students and families are made to feel welcome in the school community, when students are proportionately distributed across all groupings in the school, and when one dimension of identity (such as one's race or home language or gender or sexual orientation) does not directly correlate with undesirable aspects of schooling (such as being bullied, struggling academically, or dropping out of school). (p. 4)

As described by Theoharis and Scanlan (2015), leaders are influential in ensuring equity within classrooms. They argue, "School leaders play a central role in eliminating these educational inequities" (p. 3). As researchers and practitioners think about leadership, equity, and tracking it is important to consider all three (3) areas because of their interconnectedness. Ensuring equity requires leadership to examine the historical, structural, institutional, and individual/interpersonal levels of academic tracking (Radd et al., 2021). As articulated by Radd et al., "ability-based grouping or tracking is a common practice in schools consistently proven to perpetuate inequity, illustrating how inequity in schools spans across four levels" (p. 15). Thus, the connectedness of leadership, equity, and tracking necessitates careful consideration, advocacy, and a strong desire and commitment to change, challenge, and lead for the benefit of all students in PK-12 schools.

As previously indicated, within this section of the synthesis, the focus of the literature will emphasize the role of leadership. More specifically, the following subcategories will be used to expand and organize the literature: curriculum reformers, thoughtful supporters, culture cultivators, and instructional leaders.

### ***The Role of Leadership***

According to Oakes (1992), “tracking reform depends on attention to the technical, normative, and political dimensions of change” (p. 19). The field of PK-12 leadership has an important role in addressing academic tracking. Loveless (2009), in a study examining Massachusetts middle schools and high achievers, found that district policy makers and school administrators are the primary decision-makers and most influential creators of tracking policies. He found that state policy makers, community groups, and parents are the least influential when examining tracking policies and procedures. From Oakes’ (1992) tracking and reform framework, we know that power shaped by norms is a driving force in maintaining political interests. As such, Oakes (1992) contends “Mediating this iterative process (referring to detracking reform) entails acts that are essentially political in nature: granting of permission, taking of risks, redistributing power, forming coalitions, and so on” (p.19). Knowing that academic tracking is maintained through political influence and interest is important to addressing issues associated to this practice.

In more detail, the work of Burris and Garrity (2008) outline key questions school leaders and practitioners should analyze in order to begin the process of dismantling tracking. They ask leaders and other practitioners to inquire about when students are first grouped by ability and/or courses, what the rationale is for groupings, what influences placement has on future placements, what assessments are used to make determinations, and how placement decisions are measured.

These questions force leaders and other educators to engage in meaningful conversations and to reflect on deep-rooted beliefs and norms.

### **Curriculum Reformers.**

We also know from literature that curriculum has a profound impact on academic tracking and de-tracking efforts. More specifically, according to Rubin (2006) and Burris et al. (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) to effectively lead and address academic tracking, curriculum and instruction must focus on access interest, challenge, and relevance. By capitalizing on relevant curriculum, students are able to make connections and build upon their own interest's and knowledge. This culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy is a critical aspect of detracked classrooms (Rubin, 2006; Rubin & Noguera (2004); Theoharis & Scanlan (2015).

Additionally, many studies have highlighted the importance of equal access to curriculum for students. According to Burris, Welner and Bezozo (2009):

The past decade, has given rise to a new generation of de-tracking efforts, informed by the past research studies as well as the work of earlier reformers. These recent efforts have found greater success, and the study of these heterogeneous classrooms and schools – where all students are taught a challenging, common curriculum – provides valuable insights. (p. 2)

Accordingly, efforts to ensure access by school leaders and reformers by making curriculum adjustments guarantees de-tracking efforts are sustainable.

### **Thoughtful Supporters.**

Providing academic support for all students is another critical function of leadership and tracking reform. In almost all literature reviewed on de-tracking, researchers and practitioners

call to action a need for student support to ensure success to meet the needs of increased academic expectations and rigor. Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009) recommend providing supports to students, which include engaging in lessons using alternative methods and modalities, receiving accommodations for students labeled as having a disability, providing primary instruction in heterogeneously grouped classes with supplemental instruction as needed, to level the playing field for students within an untracked system or high-tracked curriculum for all.

It is the responsibility of leaders and teachers to break down systems, which have long separated and provided unequal opportunities for students. According to Rubin and Noguera (2004), redistributing resources and supports, paying attention to the academic development of previously underserved students, and ensuring cultural changes within each classroom are necessary for equity focused de-tracking implementation. Similarly, Establishing a culture of high expectations for all, opportunities for open enrollment, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement (AP), and integrated school curriculums are instructional and systematic reforms to address academic tracking (Burris, Welner & Murphy, 2019; Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Wiley, Welner & Murphy, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009; Rubin 2003, 2006; Welner & Burris, 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 1996)

### **Culture Cultivators.**

How individual leaders address tracking within their schools is dependent on their commitment and desire to lead equitable change. For success, leadership must create sensible and counterintuitive alternatives based on research, data, and values that support equity for all students (Oakes, 1992). Because of their influence, school leaders, as well as other members of

the field, have a responsibility to cultivate a culture of equity. As articulated by Radd et al. (2021) a culture of equity means all students or “everyone gets what they need” (p. 47). It is a matter of cultivating and leading a culture of change.

Further expanded by Radd et al. (2021):

Equity leadership seeks to provide all individuals with what they need to succeed.

Ultimately, we envision a society in which every person, inclusive of differences, has equitable access to the full and equal application of the rights of citizenship, including safety and security in all their forms, access to a quality and affirming education, the right to self-determination and plentiful opportunities to pursue happiness. (p. 48)

In order for leaders to address equity, they must strengthen school and community culture (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015). Doing so, as a social justice leader, allows stakeholders to engage in conversation that disrupts biases and assumptions. This is particularly important to acknowledge and understand when confronting academic tracking and acceleration because of the deep-rooted and systemic nature of both practices (Oakes, 1992).

As articulated by Oakes (1992) addressing school culture by establishing and adopting characteristics of de-tracking aid in successful implementation. Essential components or characteristics include:

- Recognition that tracking is supported by powerful norms that must be acknowledged and addressed as alternatives are created;
- Willingness to broaden the reform agenda, so that changes in the tracking structure become part of a comprehensive set of changes in school practice;
- Engagement in a process of inquiry and experimentation that is idiosyncratic, opportunistic, democratic, and politically sensitive;

- Persistence over the long haul that is sustained by risk-taking leaders who are clearly focused on scholarship and democratic values. (p. 449)

School leaders have the ability to be a guiding force to change a culture, not only for students, but for parents and community members as well. To highlight more specifically, a study/reform was conducted in a New York State school where three quarters (75%) of the students identify as white, approximately nine percent (9%) African American, twelve percent (12%) Latino, and three percent (3%) Asian American. Using this study that resulted in heterogeneously grouping students to eliminate racial and socio-economic tracking or stratification by Burris, Welner, and Bezozo's (2009), Burris and Garrity (2008), Burris, Heubert, and Levin (2004, 2006), Burris and Welner (2005), Burris, Wiley, Welner and Murphy (2008), in addition to Hills-Collin's (2013) framework, we can demonstrate how school leaders worked through resistance to reform and eliminated a racial hierarchy within a multi-tracked system. Because of the district's demographics, each subgroup of students had very different educational experiences. As a result, when a shift in policy and practice resulted in the elimination of a tracked course system into one high-tracked system for all students, white well-educated vocal parents who did not want their children placed in heterogeneous high-tracked classes with other students (classes of which contained low-income, students of color) challenged the reform. By holding firm to a belief that all students deserve access to high-quality or high-track curriculums, school leaders guided change to their system's culture by challenging and educating the colorblind society of white parents to ensure racism and inequality based on a tracked system was not ignored.

It is clear within the study that school leaders recognized the importance of fostering a culture committed to equal access and opportunity for students. Through regular communication

to community stakeholders, analysis and discussion of data, and monitoring implementation, school leaders held firm to a socially just mission and culture to provide equal access to all students. In addition, leaders implied an understanding of how systems of power influence our positions and shift our thinking from a colorblind society (Collins, 2013) of which is often held by members of a privileged society that experience the benefits of high tracked educational systems.

### **Instructional Leaders.**

Supporting teachers, as instructional stewards of student learning, is an essential component of addressing course tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students (Oakes 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2004, 2006; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, 2007, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009). More specifically, Oakes (1992) indicates that through de-tracking efforts the role of teachers changes resulting in their need to understand, support, and master new instructional practices, strategies, and protocols to meet the needs of students while remaining effective within classrooms. Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009) similarly advocate recommendations for teachers to work and support each other collectively to practice and share new strategies to differentiate instruction for student learning. This essential work is fostered through the support and guidance of school leaders, more specifically, instructional leaders.

As further highlighted by (Oakes, 1992; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009) professional development must be sustained long-term in order to address the practices and experiences teachers have become accustomed to in a tracked and stratified instructional learning model. To find success with this work, instructional leaders committed to social justice leadership work diligently to re-center and enhance staff capacity through professional learning and growth



(Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015). Ultimately, when leaders address tracking, acceleration, and stratification of students, in addition to demonstrating certain characteristics / qualities, as well as actions and practices associated with instructional and social justice leadership, they support all students to ensure access, achievement, and equity.

### **Conclusion**

As shared, educational practitioners, school leaders, and other members of the field design and structure learning opportunities for students to provide foundations and skills necessary to meet future success. It is evident, however, by examining student achievement, associated tracking and placement practices, policies, criteria, and regulations that students' experiences are vastly different across the PK-12 continuum. Political, technical, and normative perspectives, along with equity-focused leadership are important contexts to examine academic tracking and leadership. Oakes' (1992) framework, along with Radd et al.'s (2021) framework on equity-focused change provides a backdrop for review, analysis, and action to ensure equity, access, and achievement for all students. Failure to recognize the connection and influences that tracking, acceleration, and course stratification has on students by race, gender, ability, socioeconomic level, as well as individual achievement is harmful to equity, access, and opportunity.

As I have analyzed, learned, and interrogated my own thoughts, ideas, and perspectives related to course tracking and leadership, it is my hope that this literature review provides clarity on some of the literature associated to an essentially important dilemma schools and leaders continue to face as they promote change for access, opportunity, and achievement. The attempt to frame the literature around seven (7) themes / categories: History of Tracking, Dimensions of Tracking, Perceived Benefits of Tracking, Results or Problems with Tracking: Equity, Gaps,

Stereotyping, Marginalization, and Democracy; Influences that Contribute to Tracking: Policies, Accountability; Disrupting Tracking; and Leadership, Equity, and Tracking certainly made this literature review clearer and more manageable to develop as a resource to better understand course tracking, acceleration, and what the field knows about academic tracking and leadership.

Furthermore, this literature synthesis also shines a spotlight on the gaps in the literature. More specifically, there appears to be very limited research directly connected to district leadership beliefs and district leadership's work associated to tracking and detracking efforts. As with most of the theoretical and empirical publications reviewed, the emphasis on tracking and detracking through building leadership and teacher perspective was profound. Furthermore, there is little to no evidence of literature and studies focused on looking across suburban districts in one geographic region to understand regional ideas, perspectives, pressures, norms, and influences that result in change, action, and equity within middle and high school academic structures.

In summary, as Oakes (1992) eloquently shares regarding traditions that hold tracking in place, we need to “courageously, acknowledge that curricular, administrative, teaching, and other traditions are more powerful than the profession's best knowledge of how children actually learn” (p. 453). Accordingly, it was my intent to expand knowledge, as well as address the profound gaps in the literature by developing a dissertation study and analysis that utilized, magnified, and improved upon what we already know through the work of other researchers and practitioners. Certainly, the primary work of Oakes (1992), Burris (2010), Radd et al. (2021) and Scanlan and Theoharis (2015) assisted me in the development of this unique dissertation study and analysis focused on leading for equity that better addresses the complexity of leadership and academic tracking through understanding regional pressures, influences, and action.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methods

*“The complexities of validating qualitative research need not be due to a weakness of qualitative methods, but on the contrary, may rest upon their extraordinary power to reflect and conceptualize the nature of the phenomenon investigated, to capture the complexity of the social reality. The validation of qualitative research becomes intrinsically linked to the development of a theory of social reality.” Steinar Kvale (1983)*

The qualitative research approach to this dissertation study was an essential methodology for examining the research questions because it provided an avenue for studying a complex, sensitive, and politically connected area of education that has historically resulted in maintaining the status quo of marginalization and oppression of students within our nation’s schools. The research (data and analysis) generated from the study allows for the development of a deeper understanding of how individuals, specifically high-ranking district leaders, think about, understand, and address tracking and acceleration. In the end, this research study can be used to help leaders shape, recognize, and change personal beliefs, bias, and privileges, as well as navigate regional influences and pressures resulting in change, action, and equity within middle and high school academic structures.

### Overall Strategy/Approach

This study (timeline in Appendix A) was built upon the emergent research from the prior study. As Gail, Borg, and Gall (1996) contend, the process of gathering data in a pilot study assists in developing a proposal for a qualitative study. This type of research design process is used to help identify the research problem and determine the research question(s). Additionally, as articulated by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the qualitative approach to this study allowed for

data collection that is rich in description of people, places, and conversations. This study included participant observation and in-depth interviewing. Accordingly, the general approach was unstructured, open-ended, and focused on the process required to make meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

This study required the examination of what district leaders identify as the realities and their beliefs around tracking and acceleration. I identified multiple educational leaders as participants of the study, including Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, and Directors. The input each district leader provided was critical toward developing a better understanding why commitments concerning equity, access, and achievement for all students result in stalled efforts toward de-tracked academic systems. Ultimately, my understanding of each leader's story helped me to identify the realities, beliefs, commitments, struggles, and barriers to leading equity work around acceleration and tracking.

### **Research Setting and Population**

The research for this qualitative study was collected from high-level district leaders, more specifically, Superintendents of Schools and Assistant Superintendents or Directors of Curriculum & Instruction, who are employed in suburban component school districts in one Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in New York State. I included the two (2) top instructional leaders from six (6) suburban school districts. The districts varied in size, performance on New York State testing and accountability measures, percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, and racial demographics. The variability provided a unique representation of local school systems. It was not a requirement for all leaders to work in a district that is considered relatively high performing as measured and reported on New York

State Education Department Performance Report Cards. Leaders held different identities including race and gender. I intentionally selected participants that are both white and black, as well as male and female to ensure voices were heard and represented in conversations surrounding equity, influence, and access to academic tracking and acceleration structures and systems.

To better understand the research setting, I make a point to contextualize the political and social environment at the time the study was undertaken within the findings chapters of this dissertation. It was evident our nation's current political and social climate, due to the world pandemic, as well as race, gender, class, ability, etc. movements, likely influenced the actions and beliefs of district leaders engaged in this research study.

## **Participants**

The educational leaders selected to participate in the study were high-level district leaders (Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, and Directors) who, at the time of the study, held power to enforce, implement, as well as change policies and regulations related to acceleration and course tracking. These leaders all had and continue to have the ability to create, guide, and nurture a district's mission and vision toward equity, access, and inclusion of all students. Each participant engaged in all stages of the study (participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document / artifact collection).

To recruit participants, I contacted leaders and colleagues directly. I explained the nature of my research and my desire to assist districts in New York State. I utilized previously established relationships through regional leadership networks like BOCES Curriculum Instruction Council (BCIC) and Chief School Administrator (CSA) associations to ensure

representation of leaders. It was necessary for participants from each school district to include both a Superintendent of Schools and Assistant Superintendent or Director responsible for leading curriculum and instruction departments within a school system. In total, twelve (12) leaders, two (2) from each school district, working for six (6) different school districts were selected to participate in the study.

As stated, in order for participants to be recruited and selected they had to be currently serving as the Superintendent of Schools or the Assistant Superintendent / Director responsible for leading curriculum and instruction departments within the school district. The participants were required to have served in either role for at least one (1) year and had at a minimum five (5) years of administrative experience in PK-12 schools. Additionally, each participant was required to have served as a building-level administrator (Principal, Assistant / Vice Principal, or Administrative Dean) at some point in their career. I intentionally included leaders in school districts that were comprised of a student demographic make-up that represented all identities. The demographic make-up of each school district comprised within this study was representative of students in the geographic region which include all of the following identities: white, black, Hispanic or Latino, multi-racial, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, and English Language Learners (ELLs). While the number of students in each identity group varied, to be considered, districts needed at least some students in each demographic category. More specifically, districts within this study fell into the following ranges for each demographic group: 70 to 95% white, 1 to 11% black, 1 to 6 % Hispanic or Latino, 1 to 7% multiracial, 9 to 19% students labeled as having a disability, 20 to 48% students labeled as economically disadvantaged, and 1 to 3% of students labeled as English Language Learners (ELL).

Additionally, as Glesne and Peshkin (1991) describes, “the full participant is simultaneously a functioning member of the community undergoing the investigation and an investigator” (p. 65). As a high-level district leader within the region, I situated my work for this study as an active participant. Therefore, the relationships I held with other leaders, built of trust and respect were essential to maintaining fidelity. As Gates et al. (2001) writes, “Fidelity is a way of being-in-relation that is grounded in the four ethical ideals of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice” (p. 153). Together, participants of this study engaged with me as the researcher to create knowledge and truth.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in the study resulting in their voluntary acceptance to be observed and/or interviewed. Furthermore, approval for this study by the Syracuse University Instructional Review Board was secured prior to conducting any interviews, participant observations, and/or data collection.

### ***Description of Participants***

To offer context of the data gathered in this study, I provide a brief description of each district leader. As noted previously, to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms are used. Overall, this study included four female and eight male identifying district leaders. Additionally, one leader identified as black and the other leaders all identified as white. The educational leaders that participated in this study provided unique insights and meaning to better understanding leadership roles and perceptions because each leader held power to produce change, as well as enforce and implement policies and regulations related to acceleration, course tracking and stratification of students.

*Superintendent Fanton* is in his 50s. He is the leader of District 1. He has served students in the role of high school teacher, Assistant Principal, Elementary Principal, and Superintendent of Schools in two different school districts (rural and suburban). Superintendent Fanton indicated his motivation for serving in leadership positions was “to have influence.” Additionally, he shared, “To serve more people -- I call it service leadership. I enjoy the influence I can have. The difference I can make. I want it to be broader. I get that I am not going to interact with students as much, but I can interact with parents. I can interact with the community and that sort of has been the impetus [motivation of his leadership] all along.”

*Assistant Superintendent Maxwell* is in his 50s. He oversees curriculum and instruction in District 1 and has served students in the role of high school teacher, Assistant Principal, and Assistant Superintendent. All of his teaching and leadership experience is in suburban schools. He shared his transition to leadership was about other school leaders. Maxwell said, “Just seeing them in action and thinking that they're doing really good work -- really good stuff and I wanted to do that work. That was a big part of it [referring to a shift from teacher into school leadership].”

*Superintendent Williams* is in his 50s. He is the leader of District 2 and has served students in the role of middle school teacher, Assistant Principal, Curriculum Coordinator, Director of Curriculum, Elementary School Principal, Middle School Principal, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent of Schools. All of Superintendent Williams’s experiences have been in suburban schools. Superintendent Williams indicated a commitment to addressing equity, access, and opportunities for all students in his district. He shared he was motivated to enter the field of school leadership because he worked for a school leader he did not respect very



much and had a desire to counteract “the frustration he experienced with that style of leadership.”

*Assistant Superintendent Samuels* is in his 40s and has served students in the role of elementary school teacher, Administrative Intern, Instructional Coach, Content Area Supervisor, and Assistant Superintendent. He oversees curriculum and instruction in District 2 and his experiences have been in both suburban and urban schools. Some of his major responsibilities include maintaining the academic programming, overseeing professional development, as well as the districts efforts around equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive and sustaining education. Samuels shared he was motivated to become a school and district leader because of “an appreciation for leadership,” opportunities, and the desire to navigate “the complexities associated with working with people and understanding systems level thinking.”

*Superintendent Fulton* is in his 50s. He is the superintendent of District 3 and has served students in the role of junior high school counselor, Assistant Principal, Middle School Principal, Elementary School Principal, Director of Elementary Education, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent of Schools. All of Superintendent Fulton’s experiences have been in urban and suburban schools. His desire to embark on a path of district leadership stemmed from a longing to change the lives of students of color in a city school district. He also shared he wanted to situate himself to be in a “position to make certain decisions that could really have more of an impact on all students.”

*Assistant Superintendent Lassard* is in his 40s. He oversees curriculum and instruction in District 3 and has served students in the role of teacher, Elementary School Principal, Middle School Principal, and Assistant Superintendent. All of Lassard’s experiences have been in

suburban schools. He shared he “got pulled into administration” and a lot of his leadership focus is spent on “working with people, supporting people, getting resources for people, and trying to keep things moving forward.” Additionally, Lassard shared, “I’m privileged to have the position I have. I love coming to work every day -- Some days are difficult. Some days are defeating. Some days are exhausting. I find this work exciting. I care about my administrators. I care about my community. I care about all of our students.”

*Superintendent Weagraff* is in his 50s. He is the superintendent of District 4 and has served students in the role of teacher, Elementary School Principal, Director of Athletics, Director of Technology, High School Principal, Director of Secondary Education, and Superintendent of Schools. Weagraff’s experiences have been in rural and suburban schools. He indicated his desire to engage in leadership because he wanted more impact on outcomes. He shared, “I felt like maybe I could have a little bit of a greater influence on what my beliefs were for improving what we are, as an organization, and what we do in school systems.”

*Director of Curriculum & Instruction Pope* is in her 30s. She is responsible for curriculum and instruction in District 4 and has served students in the role of elementary and middle school teacher, Instructional Coach, High School Principal, Content Supervisor, and Director of Curriculum and Instruction. All of Pope’s experiences have been in suburban schools. Pope’s desire to embark on school leadership stemmed from a love of learning. She shared, “I had always loved learning and I loved teaching and being in the classroom and I was confident that I did well in that role. I started taking on leadership roles within the building and knew that I could do more and make a greater impact by sharing what I was so passionate about.”

*Superintendent Skinner* is in her 50s. She is the Superintendent of District 5 and has served students in the role of teacher, Assistant Principal, High School Principal, and Superintendent of Schools (both in rural and suburban school districts). Skinner has been a school leader for over 20 years. She shared her transition into school leadership occurred just after Columbine [a 1999 school shooting and massacre] happened. She said, “I remember sitting there watching it on the news and I turned to my father and said, I don't think I'm going to have a problem anymore [referring to people listening to her]. Nope! So, I started doing a lot of work in the North Country [of New York State]. I started getting tapped to do things and sit on committees. It just sort of took off from there, you know, in terms of me just wanting to be a leader.” Skinner continued, “I always tell people, it became more important for me to teach life than to teach a content area. Once I felt like I was cheating kids in my classroom, because I really wanted to be teaching life, it was time to go [enter leadership].”

*Assistant Superintendent Lampman* is in her 50s. She is the Assistant Superintendent of District 5 and has served students in the role of teacher, Instructional Coach, Director of Education, Data Coordinator, Assistant Principal, and Assistant Superintendent. Lampman’s experiences have been in urban and suburban schools. Her transition into leadership roles occurred because she felt she could do a better job than some of the leaders she worked with. Lampman shared, “Honestly, I'll tell you I felt as a teacher and then as an instructional coach I could do it better and that was what motivated me. I was like oh, my goodness, I should be doing this because I would do it so much better.”

*Superintendent Allen* is in her 70s. She is the Superintendent of District 6 and has served students in the role of teacher, Instructional Coach, Assistant Principal, Elementary School Principal, Director of Elementary Education, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent of

Schools. Allen has been a school leader in urban and suburban schools and has been a superintendent for 17 years. She indicated her motivation to pursue leadership stemmed from “circles of influence”. Allen stated, “the level of the circle of influence with regard to overall leadership in guiding change, to particularly ineffective practices, in schools and developing effective continuous improvement plans and developing plans that would begin to integrate the things that we weren't currently doing that we needed to do, or that we were doing that we needed to stop doing. Overall, I would say it [motivation] was circles of influence. I actually loved my principalship -- I don't think I ever would have left it, but again I was faced with the fact that there were aspects of decision-making circles of influence that I could not reach in that role.”

*Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube'* is in his 40s. He is responsible for curriculum and instruction in District 6 and has served students in the role of middle school teacher, assistant principal, elementary school principal, and director of curriculum and instruction. All of his experiences have been in the same suburban school district. Some of his major responsibilities include leading and facilitating the district's strategic planning process. Dube' shared how his district, “continually focuses on being a highly reliable organization. He stated, “How do we build coherence and alignment? I think we found a good way of doing that – Of really having our strategic plan being that guiding light that kind of directs a lot of our focus and intentions. That trickles into how I help support buildings in their school improvement planning process as they as connect their [building] goals to our strategic planning focus area goals.”

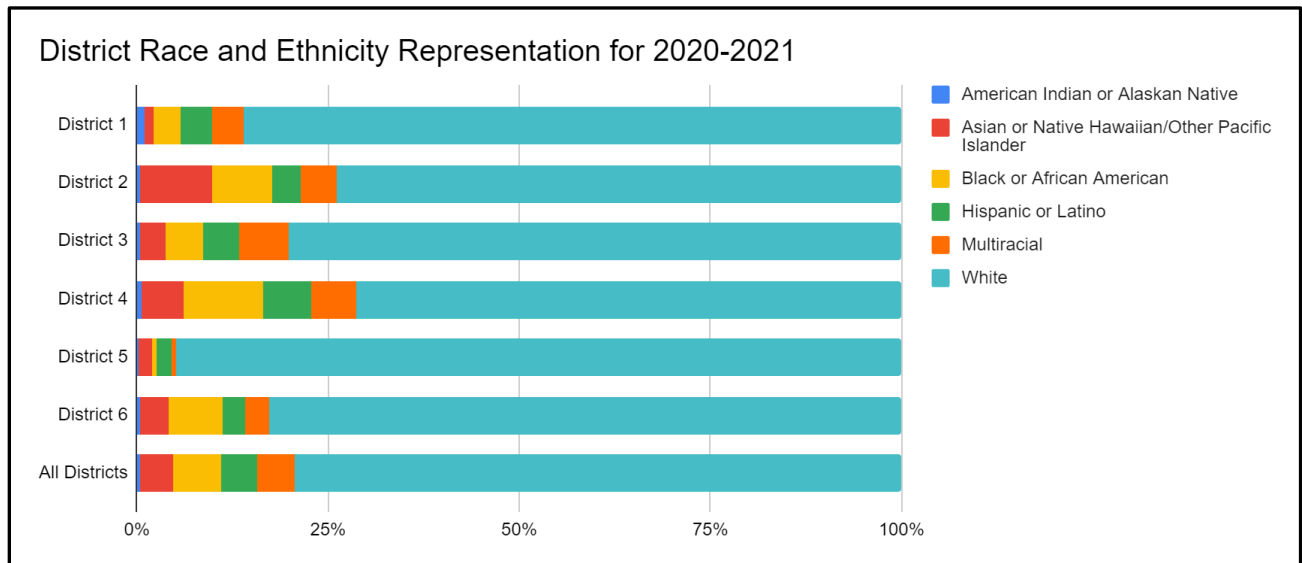
## **District Enrollment Data**

In this section of the methodology chapter, district demographic enrollment data is represented in a variety of figures and tables. The descriptive data is foundational and context forming to enhance an understanding of how course enrollment is represented across areas of identity and diversity. More specifically, Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1 represent the district demographic of race and ethnicity, Figure 3.2 and Table 3.2 represent the district demographic of gender, Figure 3.3 and Table 3.3 represent the district demographic of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status, along with Figure 3.4 and Table 3.4 representing the district demographic of disability and ability level status as defined by receiving special education programming and services.

### ***Race and Ethnicity***

Participating districts are represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1. In summary, the districts are categorized as predominately white ranging from approximately 71% to 95% white. Students of color makeup as few as 5% and at most 29% of the overall student population from district to district. Overall, across all of the school districts, the 66 students identifying as American Indian or Alaskan Native represent 0.5% of students. The 534 students identifying as Asian or Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander represent about 4%. The 825 students identifying as black or African American represent about 6%. The 585 students identifying as Hispanic or Latino represent just under 5% of all students. The 641 students identifying as multiracial represent 5% of students and the 10,206 students identifying as white represent approximately 79% of students represented in this study.

Figure 3.1 District Demographics – Race and Ethnicity



**All Districts**

American Indian or Alaskan Native: **66 (0.5%)**

Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander: **534 (4.2%)**

Black or African American: **825 (6.4%)**

Hispanic or Latino: **585 (4.6%)**

Multiracial: **641 (5.0%)**

White: **10206 (79.4%)**

Table 3.1 District Demographics – Race and Ethnicity

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	All Districts
American Indian or Alaskan Native	19	6	14	18	1	8	66
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	27	126	129	179	14	59	534
Black or African American	71	107	186	340	5	116	825
Hispanic or Latino	89	50	180	203	14	49	585
Multiracial	86	64	240	194	5	52	641
White	1785	999	3041	2312	716	1353	10206

## Gender

Participating districts are represented by gender in Figure 3.2 and Table 3.2. In summary, the districts can be categorized as having a gender ratio of 50:50. In all participants' districts, there are slightly more students that identify as males as compared to females. Overall, there are 6,612 male students and 6,245 female students representing roughly 51% and 49% respectively.

Figure 3.2 District Demographics – Gender

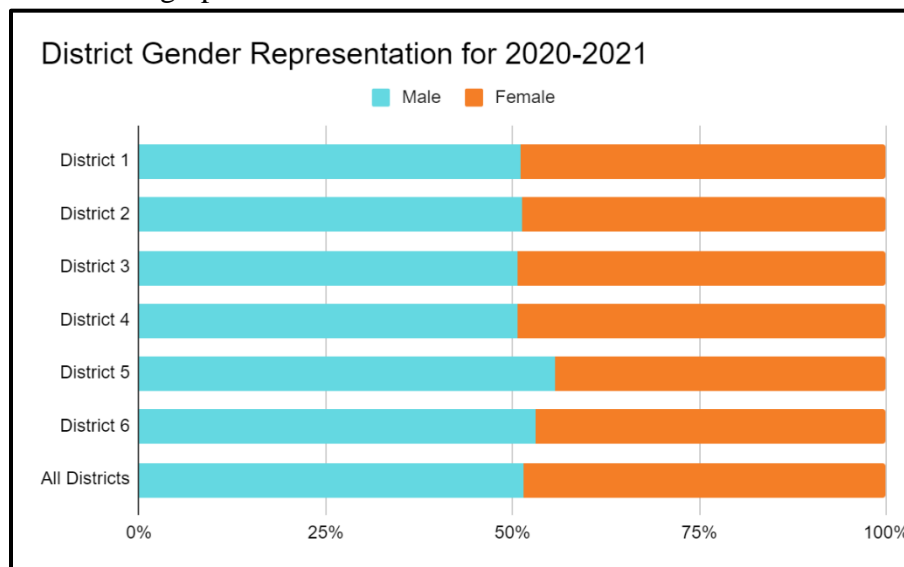


Table 3.2 District Demographics – Gender

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	All Districts
# of Females	1015	660	1867	1600	335	768	6245
# of Males	1062	692	1923	1646	420	869	6612

## Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL)

Participating districts are represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 3.3 and Table 3.3. In summary, the district have very

few students that are labeled as LEP/ELL. Overall, there are 185 students labeled as LEP/ELL across all school districts making up just over one percent of the entire population of students.

Figure 3.3 District Demographics – LEP/ELL

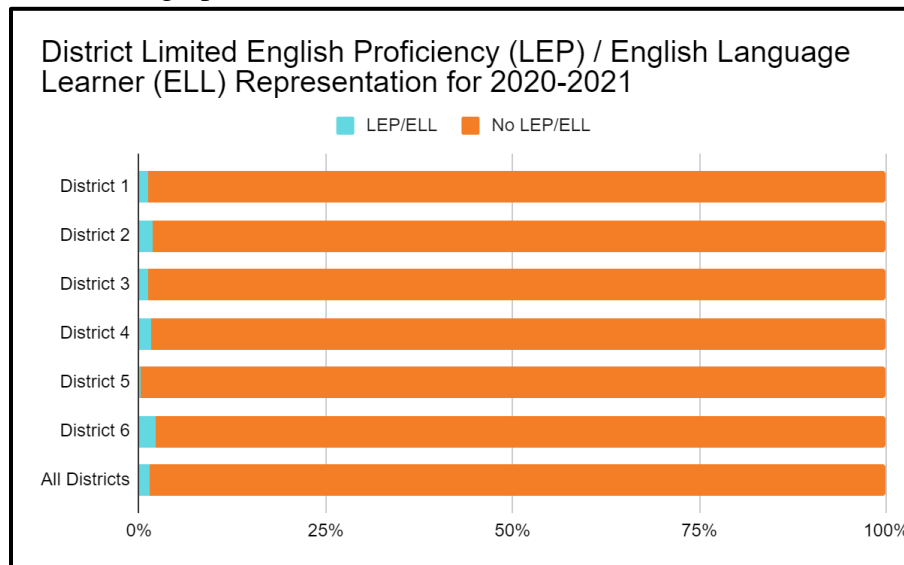


Table 3.3 District Demographics – LEP/ELL

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	All Districts
# of LEP/ELL	25	24	47	52	1	36	185
# of No LEP/ELL	2052	1328	3743	3194	754	1601	12672

### ***Labeled Disability / Ability***

Participating districts are represented by labeled disability / ability status in Figure 3.4 and Table 3.4. In summary, students labeled as having a disability as a result of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) range from as low as 10% to as high as 18% depending on the size of the school district. Overall, there are 1,862 students with IEPs and 10,995 students without IEPs representing roughly 14% and 86% respectively.



Figure 3.4 District Demographics – Labeled Disability / Ability

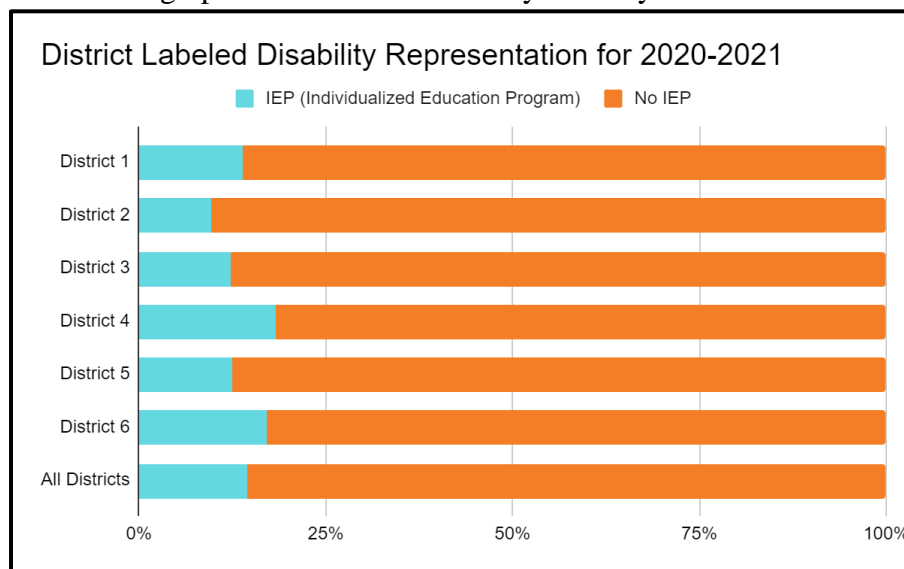


Table 3.4 District Demographics – Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	All Districts
# of IEP (Individual Education Program)	290	132	468	597	95	280	1862
# of No IEP	1787	1220	3322	2649	660	1357	10995

In summary, this section focused on district demographic enrollment data highlights some of the differences and similarities across all participating districts. As represented in this section through a variety of figures and tables, the descriptive data provides a foundation, as well as context which will likely lead to a better understanding and analysis of course enrollment by areas of identity and diversity within the next chapter of this study.

## Data Collection Methods

The methods for data collection included participant observations, informal semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and historical product / document reviews (artifacts). The multiple sources of data collection allowed for analysis and synthesis of data

from various viewpoints and perspectives. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggests, triangulation of data requires fact and/or truth to be established from more than one source of information. That being stated, multiple forms of data collection led to more meaningful understandings of phenomena. As a matter of process, I included fieldnotes and memorandums as part of the collection of data. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), as well as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), fieldnotes are accounts of the researcher's experiences collecting and reflecting on data through immersion of lived experiences. They are descriptive accounts of experiences and observations by way of interpretation and sense-making (Emerson et al., 1995). In so much as the fieldnotes were both descriptive and reflective, they were utilized to help me, as a researcher, to reflect upon, acknowledge, and control by own positionality as a high-level district leader and the researcher who conducted the study.

### ***Semi-structured Interviews (Individual and Joint) & Focus Groups***

According to Warren (2002), qualitative interviewing is a guided conversation focused on deriving interpretations of respondents' thoughts and ideas. It is an open-ended dialogue which consists of probes and follow-up questions. For this study, I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to "gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103). This data collection process required social interaction, relationship building, and confidentiality to build trust (Warren, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

For the study, sixty (60) minute interviews with participants began in the fall of 2021. The interviews were audio and video recorded through the Zoom video conferencing communication platform. Follow-up interviews with each participant were conducted to gain a

deeper in-depth understanding of the district leaders' experiences with tracking and acceleration. The interviews and associated questions were informal, semi-structured and open-ended and designed to produce rich conversation / dialogue about the research questions. The question guides used for the individual semi-structured interviews are located within Appendix B and C.

I scheduled interviews with two (2) district leaders from each school district. It was necessary for the Superintendent of Schools, as the chief school officer, to be included as one of the two district leaders who participated in the interviews. Given the organizational structure and /or size of the school districts, either an Assistant Superintendent or Director were selected as the other instructional leader interviewed. Following the individual semi-structured interviews, I conducted small regional focus groups. Two separate and unique focus groups were utilized: 1) a focus group consisting of all the Superintendents and 2) a separate focus group with all district curriculum and instruction leaders (Assistant Superintendents and/or Directors). According to Madriz (2000), "Compared with individual interviews, the clear advantage of focus groups is that they make it possible for researchers to observe the interactive process occurring among participants" (p. 836). This was an essential and unique component of this research study given my desire to better understand regional influence, pressure, and resistance of leaders as they navigated addressing tracking and acceleration within their school systems. As anticipated, the use of focus groups gave voice to the socially just school leader, whether they were serving in the role of chief school officer (Superintendent) or high-level leader, as an Assistant Superintendent or Director. The question guide used for the focus groups is located within Appendix E.

In addition to the focus group questions used to spark conversation and dialogue, I shared the unique Civil Rights Data Collection AP® and Dual Enrollment Data in the form of a

presentation representing gender, ability, LEP/ELL designation, and race/ethnicity to force the district leaders to reflect and challenge their thinking. The data used for the focus group presentation represented the total enrollments for all districts. The data was not subdivided or broken down by each district like the data represented in Chapter 4.

Following the regional focus group meetings, I scheduled and conducted one (1) joint interview comprised of the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent or Director for each district. The question guide for the joint interviews is located within Appendix D.

To summarize the data collection process associated with my semi-structured interviews, joint interviews, and focus groups, I conducted two (2) interviews with each leader individually, held two (2) focus groups – one (1) focus group comprised of all of the Superintendents or Chief School Officers of the school districts, and one (1) focus group comprised of all of the Assistant Superintendents or Directors that lead the curriculum and instruction departments within each district. For the final stage of the interview data collection process, I conducted a joint interview with each pair of leaders (Superintendent of Schools and Assistant Superintendent / Director of Curriculum and Instruction) from each school district to understand, investigate, and further discuss issues of equity, influence, realities, resistance, and beliefs around tracking and acceleration in their school district.

Memorandums were written after listening to, transcribing, and reading transcripts of individual semi-structured and focus group interviews, as well as after generating fieldnotes. As Saldana (2009) suggests, creating memos assists the researcher with reflecting on “deeper and complex meanings” (p. 32) as they begin to code and analyze significance within the produced

data. Furthermore, I used the memos to assist in reflecting, along with expanding upon emergent themes, categories and concepts generated from the fieldnotes.

### ***Participant Observations***

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1991), participant observation “ranges across a continuum from mostly observation to mostly participation” (p. 64). As the researcher, I served as the observer and participant in the participant observations. Given the context of the study, as well as my role as a district leader and Deputy Superintendent of Schools in a New York State school district, my role as observer was primarily “participant as observer” as opposed to “observer as participant” (p. 65).

Participant observations containing rich / thick descriptions occurred within the following settings: Board of Education meetings, regional Chief School Administrator (CSA) meetings, and BOCES Curriculum Instruction Council (BCIC) trainings. Participate observation data collection ranged in length from thirty (30) minutes to sixty (60) minutes and depended on the context of the training, meeting, or session. Fieldnotes were produced after engaging in the social interactions (participant observations) and review of researcher jottings (description of physical setting, activities, behaviors, etc.). For this study, I attended two (2) meetings with Superintendents and three (3) meetings with Assistant Superintendents / Directors. I was also able to view one (1) Board of Education meeting for 3 out of the 6 districts included in this study where both Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents interacted with Board of Education members and the general public. While the data from participant observations was not utilized within the findings chapters of this dissertation, the data was used to understand the context of

the district leaders' work and provided awareness of their roles and responsibilities which contributed to my analysis and reflection of the interview data.

### ***Artifacts / Historical Document Reviews***

I gathered artifacts like Board of Education policies, administrative regulations and procedures, as well as written acceleration and/or tracking criteria from school leaders within each school district for review and analysis. I used the inductive and deductive codes generated from the interview data to help me organize, analyze, compare, and contrast the policies, regulations, and procedures the district leaders provided. By evaluating and interpreting the documents, I gained an understanding of their true meaning which helped me determine how district leaders think about, implement, and advocate or not change to their systems and structures.

Additionally, I requested course enrollment data from each school leader's student information system, in addition to civil rights data collection (CRDC) data on advanced course taking and placement for high school students. The Board of Education policies, administrative regulations and procedures, written acceleration and/or tracking criteria, as well as the course enrollment data was used to complete a policy and practice comparison of the track options within the schools in Chapter 4 of this study. The CRDC data was used during the focus group interviews with the groups of district leaders (Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents / Directors of Curriculum & Instruction. The data was presented in a format similar to what is represented in Chapter 4. The data was used as a discussion point and sparked conversation about equity and access to AP® (Advanced Placement) and Dual Enrollment courses within the schools. The document / artifact reviews provided a social, historical, political, and

organizational context to this study and helped me to make meaning of the realities around equity, tracking and acceleration in the New York school districts.

## **Data Analysis**

Through the collection, interpretation, and analysis of data, the construction of truth and meaning was created. As described by Emerson et al. (1995), the process of interpreting and analyzing qualitative data includes writing fieldnotes, reading fieldnotes, asking questions, analytically coding (focused or open) fieldnotes, creating memos, selecting themes/categories, sorting, resorting, and creating more memos. It is a cyclical process! Similarly, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) represent the landscape of qualitative interpretation and analysis as the following: fieldwork, read and order data, generate preliminary codes / categories, assign units to data, organize the data, and synthesize the data. More specifically, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define interpretation as “developing ideas about your findings and relating them to the literature and to broader concerns and concepts” (p. 159) and analysis as “working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p. 159).

## ***Qualitative Data***

The data generated from participant observations, semi-structured and focus group interviews was organized and analyzed using an open coding system centered on different topics and themes found within the interviews, memorandums, and field notes. I analyzed across transcripts using both inductive and deductive coding. I followed the six-step coding process commonly known as the “Three Cs of Data Analysis: Codes, Categories, Concepts” (Lichtman, 2013, p.252). As she describes,

The six steps are as follows,

Step 1. Initial coding. Going from response to summary ideas of the responses

Step 2. Revisiting initial coding

Step 3. Developing an initial list of categories

Step 4. Modifying initial list based on additional rereading

Step 5. Revisiting your categories and subcategories

Step 6. Moving from categories to concepts (p. 252)

Using Lichtman's (2013) six steps as a process to code, categorize and develop concepts, along with my conceptual framework as a guide, I informed my analysis of the data. More specifically, I used Oakes (1992) framework to generate codes and categories related to the normative, political, and technical actions of school leaders as they discussed and communicated the influences, realities, and resistance around academic tracking and acceleration. My initial codes are highlighted within Table 3.5. I used Radd et al.'s (2021) framework for designing sustainable, systemic, equity-focused change to expand my coding and categorization of the data to address the influence, approach, and strategy school leaders described as they pursue change within their school systems. The expanded codes are located within Table 3.6. Lastly, I used the practices identified within Scanlan & Theoharis' (2015) socially just leadership to code and categorize the leadership practices and beliefs my participants, the school leaders, held, exhibited, and communicated as they lead and influence change (or not) to equity, access, achievement within academic tracking and acceleration systems.



Table 3.5 Dissertation Initial Coding

AccelNeg – Negative association with Acceleration	LeadMent – Mentoring Leader Characteristics/Qualities
AccelPos – Positive association with Acceleration	LeadPass – Passionate Leader Characteristics/Qualities
AccelIssEqu – Issues of Equity associated to Acceleration	LeadPrbSI – Problem Solver Leader Characteristic/Qualities
AccelData – Acceleration associated to Data	LeadRefl – Reflective Leader Characteristics/Qualities
EnvirCon – Whole School Connection to Learning Environment	LeadRela – Relationship Builder Leader Characteristics/Qualities
EnvirEng – Engaged Learning Environment	LeadSJ – Social Justice Leader
EnvirInv – Parent Involved in Learning Environment	LeadSup – Supportive Leader Characteristics/Qualities
EnvirNeg – Negative Learning Environment	LeadTrans – Transparent Leader Characteristics/Qualities
EnvirPos – Positive Learning Environment	LeadUnd – Understanding Leadership Characteristics/Qualities
IssAcc – Issues of Access	LeadVis – Visionary Leader Characteristics/Qualities
IssEqu – Issues of Equity	LeadXmple – Lead by example (Natural Leadership) Characteristics/Qualities
LeadAdv – Advocate Leader Characteristics/Qualities	MindDef – Deficit Mindset
LeadCom – Strong Leadership Commitment Characteristics/Qualities	MindGro – Growth Mindset
LeadComn – Good Communicator Characteristics/Qualities	RoleDirCurr – District Role as Director of Curriculum & Instruction
LeadComp – Compliance Characteristics/Qualities	SucAssess – Success is connected to Assessment
LeadConf – Confidence in Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	SucIndv – Success is individualized
LeadDed – Dedicated to Organization Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	TrackIssEqu – Issues of Equity associated to Tracking
LeadDutResp – Leadership Duties and Responsibilities	TrackNeg – Negative association with Tracking
LeadFlex – Leader Characteristics/Qualities of being Flexible	TrackPos – Positive association with Tracking
LeadHon – Honest Leader Characteristics/Qualities	TrackPol – Political Dimension of Tracking
LeadInc – Inconsistency in Decisions Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	TrackNorm – Normative Dimension Tracking
LeadInf – Leader Influence	TrackTech – Technical Dimension of Tracking
LeadKnw – Knowledgeable Leader Characteristics/Qualities	ToA – Theory of Action
LeadLoy – Loyal Leader Characteristics/Qualities	ToC – Theory of Change

Table 3.6 Dissertation Expanded Coding

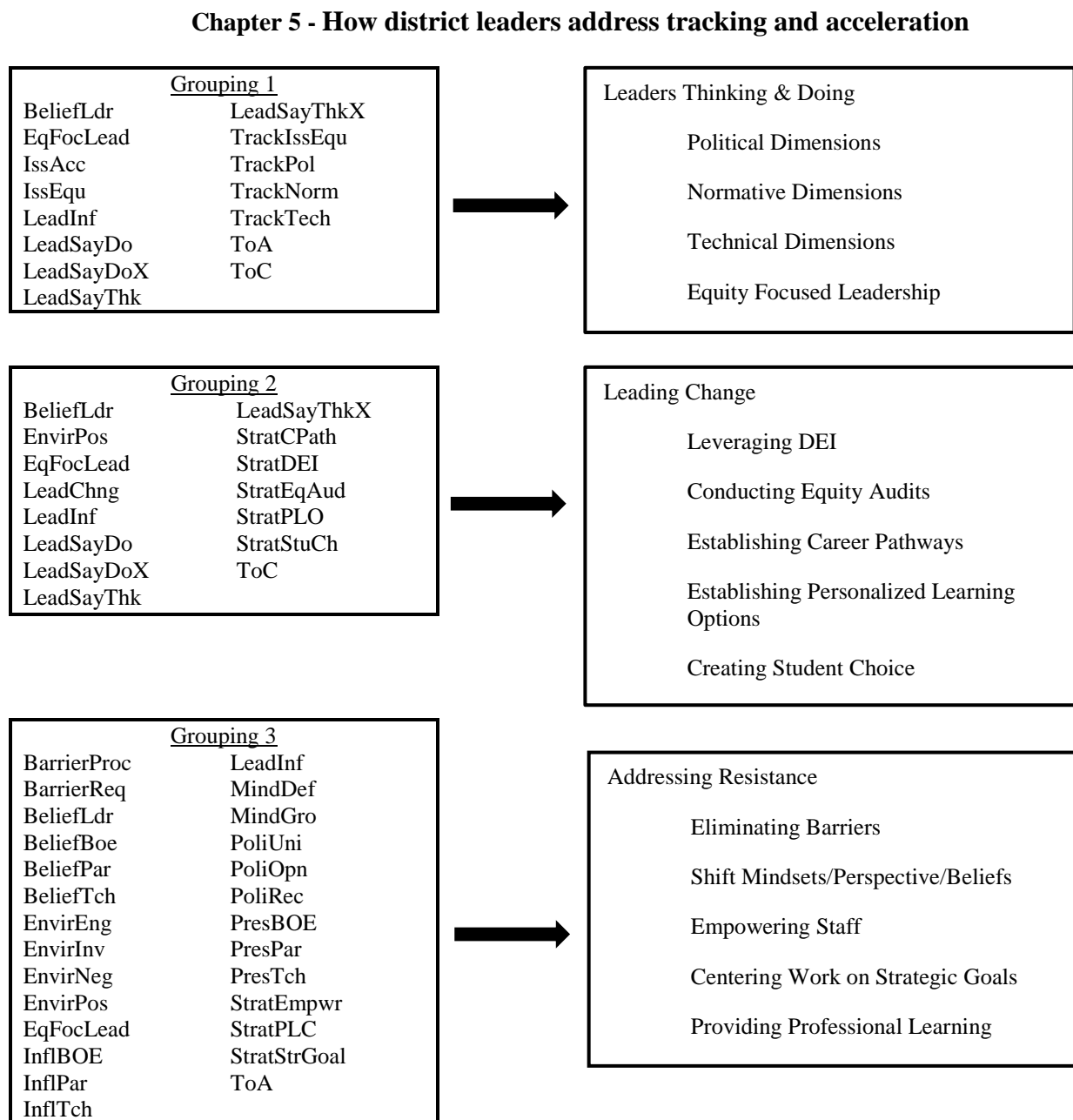
AccelNeg – Negative association with Acceleration	* LeadSayDo – Leader says they are Doing
AccelPos – Positive association with Acceleration	* LeadSayDoX – Leader says they are Doing Example
AccelIssEqu – Issues of Equity associated to Acceleration	* LeadSayThk – Leader says they are Thinking
AccelData – Acceleration associated to Data	* LeadSayThkX – Leader says they are Thinking Example
* BarrierProc – Barrier Process	LeadSJ – Social Justice Leader
* BarrierReq – Barrier Requirement	LeadSup – Supportive Leader Characteristics/Qualities
* BeliefLdr – Leader Belief	LeadTrans – Transparent Leader Characteristics/Qualities
* BeliefBoe – Board of Education Belief	LeadUnd – Understanding Leadership Characteristics/Qualities
* BeliefPar – Parent Belief	LeadVis – Visionary Leader Characteristics/Qualities
* BeliefTch – Teacher Belief	
* DefAccel – Definition of Acceleration	
* DefTrack – Definition of Tracking	
EnvirCon – Whole School Connection to Learning Environment	

EnvirEng – Engaged Learning Environment	LeadXmple – Lead by example (Natural Leadership) Characteristics/Qualities
EnvirInv – Parent Involved in Learning Environment	MindDef – Deficit Mindset
EnvirNeg – Negative Learning Environment	MindGro – Growth Mindset
EnvirPos – Positive Learning Environment	* PoliUni – Universal Policy
EqFocLead – Equity Focused Leadership	* PoliOpn – Open Enrollment Policy
* InflBOE – Board of Education Influence	* PoliRec – Recommendation Policy
* InflPar – Parent Influence	* PresBOE – Board of Education Pressure
* InflTch – Teacher Influence	* PresPar – Parent Pressure
IssAcc – Issues of Access	* PresTch – Teacher Pressure
IssEqu – Issues of Equity	* RegCollab – Regional Collaboration
LeadAdv – Advocate Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* RegFlu – Regional Influence
* LeadChng – Leading Change	* RegPres – Regional Pressure
LeadCom – Strong Leadership Commitment Characteristics/Qualities	RoleDirCurr – District Role as Director of Curriculum & Instruction
LeadComn – Good Communicator Characteristics/Qualities	* StratCPath – Career Pathway Strategy
LeadComp – Compliance Characteristics/Qualities	* StratDEI – DEI Strategy
LeadConf – Confidence in Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	* StratEmpwr – Empower Staff Strategy
LeadDed – Dedicated to Organization Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	* StratEqAud – Equity Audit Strategy
LeadDutResp – Leadership Duties and Responsibilities	* StratPLC – Professional Learning Strategy
LeadFlex – Leader Characteristics/Qualities of being Flexible	* StratPLO – Personalized Learning Option Strategy
LeadHon – Honest Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* StratStrGoal – Strategic Goal Strategy
LeadInc – Inconsistency in Decisions Leadership Characteristics/Qualities	* StratStuCh – Student Choice Strategy
LeadInf – Leader Influence	SucAssess – Success is connected to Assessment
LeadKnw – Knowledgeable Leader Characteristics/Qualities	SucIndv – Success is individualized
LeadLoy – Loyal Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* SuptCollab – District Leader Collaboration
LeadMent – Mentoring Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* SuptCompete – District Leader Competition
LeadPass – Passionate Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* SuptEgo – District Leader Ego
LeadPrbSl – Problem Solver Leader Characteristic/Qualities	* TrackAdv – Advanced Track
LeadRefl – Reflective Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* TrackLoc – Local Track
LeadRela – Relationship Builder Leader Characteristics/Qualities	* TrackReg – Regents Track
	* TrackIssEqu – Issues of Equity associated to Tracking
	TrackNeg – Negative association with Tracking
	TrackPos – Positive association with Tracking
	TrackPol – Political Dimension of Tracking
	TrackNorm – Normative Dimension Tracking
	TrackTech – Technical Dimension of Tracking
	ToA – Theory of Action
	ToC – Theory of Change
	* Represents Additions to Codes and Categories

As I coded and categorized the data, I began grouping the codes into buckets which advanced around the study's three research questions. My intent to organize my data around the three research questions seemed most efficient, logical, and effective. As I placed all of the codes into the three buckets I began organizing the data into the themes and concepts. These ultimately

became the headings and subheadings for the findings chapters. As an example, I represent how the various codes are organized within a specific bucket, which led to the creation of the categories and subcategories of my findings chapter, by using Figure 3.5 to represent data in Chapter 5.

Figure 3.5 Chapter 5 Organization of Codes / Themes



As the researcher, I examined, questioned, and scrutinized the data through relentless review and analysis. As analytic memos were created, I documented and reflected. Saldana (2009) suggests, “The purpose of analytic memo writing is to document and reflect on: your coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data – all possibly leading toward theory” (p. 32). He suggests that memos include opportunities for making connections and links by way of code weaving. By using these strategies to complicate my data, I “demonstrate how the puzzle pieces fit together” (p. 36) allowing explanations between and among concepts and themes.

Thus, the emerging concepts and themes generated from the data highlight “proposed connections between and among events, structures roles, and social forces operating in people’s lives” (Seidman, 2006, p. 129). Ultimately, this analysis has led to a better understanding, in addition to the generation of theories connected to the research questions to help the field of PK-12 leadership shape, recognize, and change personal beliefs, bias, and privileges, as well as navigate regional influences and pressures resulting in change, action, and equity within middle and high school academic structures.

### ***Quantitative / Descriptive Data***

At the beginning of this research study I had no intention of using quantitative / descriptive data to answer my research questions, but given the relationships I formed with my participants and because they provided me with rich quantitative course enrollment data, it was too important for me to leave out of this study. I recognize that much more can be done with the quantitative data I received from my participants; however, I felt it was necessary to use what I

could from what the leaders provided me to help paint the picture of what was happening or not happening within their districts and schools which enriched the qualitative analysis of this study.

While conducting, semi-structured and focus group interviews with my participants, I asked the leaders whether they had access to course enrollment data. Upon confirmation, I utilized my own district's student information system, SchoolTool by Mindex, to determine the type of data export I would request from each of my participants. I sent specific instructions to my participants asking them to export the data for the 2020-2021 school year. They used a course scores dashboard within the SchoolTool system to generate the data export. The leaders were asked to filter the dashboard using the following categories: building(s), all grades, all ethnicities, all cohorts, all course departments, all course names, all course teachers, all courses "is state." Once the data was exported to a comma-separated values (CSV) file, I directed the leaders to delete all columns with exception to columns that contained the following headings: gender, ethnicity, school year, grade, building, course dept., course ID, course name, course is honors, is IEP, is LEP, and is 504. I did this to protect any personally identifiable information (PII) for each student. One piece of data that was removed from the data file prior to leaders sending it to me was each student's unique identification number.

Once the data was received from all of the leaders. The data was uploaded into a Google Sheets document. In total, 104,626 student course enrollment records were secured for analysis. The document was sorted by district, department, and course name. I utilized the course catalogs (artifacts) each leader provided me so that I could identify the academic track option for each course. As a means for simplifying and characterizing each of the three academic tracks, I have chosen to represent or label the lowest academic form of track option as "Local" with "Regents" representing the middle (i.e., majority) academic-level track, and "Advanced" representing the

premier, most rigorous / challenging of the three track options. The “Advanced” track contains accelerated, Advanced Placement (AP®), college-level and/or honors-level courses offered in schools.

I organized, sorted, and analyzed the data using pivot tables and 100% stacked bar charts. The findings in Chapter 4 represents the acceleration and course track enrollments across areas of identify and diversity for the three track options (i.e., “Local,” “Regents,” and “Advanced”) available to students in each district. My analysis closely examined the proportionality and disproportionality of student placements into the various track options. I defined disproportionality as an identity group’s representation in a track option that either exceeded expectations for that group in comparison to all of the student course placements or differed substantially from the representation of the larger group. More simplistically stated, I assumed that if there are 100 Black students in a district of 1000 students which represents 10% then I would expect proportionally that 10 Black students would be in the “Advanced” course track since 10 represents 10% of the 100 Black students.

Additionally, I analyzed quantitative data secured from the United States Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. The data represented the most current information available as published by the United States Department of Education for the schools associated with this study’s district leaders. The data included the number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP®) and Dual Enrollment courses for the 2017 academic school year. The data was not mutually exclusive to individual students for the categories represented in my data tables. More specifically, a student could be represented more than one time in the categories of Enrollment in AP®, Enrollment in AP® Math / Science or in Dual Enrollment because they participated or took more than one AP® or Dual enrollment course (e.g., student took an AP®

mathematics and science course). The AP® course Dual Enrollment offerings and examinations are represented in Table 3.5. Similarly, as articulated above for the course enrollment data provided by the study’s district leaders, I did not have the ability to isolate individual students because a unique personal identifier or PII for each student was not provided as part of the data set. This reality may have resulted in proportional representation or disproportionality working less well for the data analysis when students engaged in multiple AP® or Dual Enrollment courses.

Table 3.5 AP® Programs and Examination Categories

<u>Enrollment in AP®</u>	<u>Enrollment in AP® Math /Science</u>	<u>Enrollment in Dual Enrollment</u>
Art and Design	Calculus AB	Any College Course
Art History	Calculus BC	
Music Theory	Computer Science A	
English Language and Composition	Computer Science Principles	
English Literature and Composition	Precalculus	
Comparative Government and Politics	Statistics	
European History	Biology	
Human Geography	Chemistry	
Macroeconomics	Environmental Science	
Microeconomics	Physics 1: Algebra-Based	
Psychology	Physics 2: Algebra-Based	
United States Government and Politics	Physics C: Electricity and Magnetism	
United States History	Physics C: Mechanics	
World History: Modern		
Calculus AB		
Calculus BC		
Computer Science A		
Computer Science Principles		
Precalculus		
Statistics		
Biology		
Chemistry		
Environmental Science		
Physics 1: Algebra-Based		
Physics 2: Algebra-Based		
Physics C: Electricity and Magnetism		
Physics C: Mechanics		
Chinese Language and Culture		
French Language and Culture		
German Language and Culture		
Italian Language and Culture		
Japanese Language and Culture		
Latin		
Spanish Language and Culture		
Spanish Literature and Culture		

## **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to all ethical standards as established by the Code of Ethics of the American Educational Research Association, as well as the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Given my positionality, as the researcher, participation of leaders within the study was strictly voluntary. All data collected throughout the study remained confidential, protected anonymity, and ensured no harm to participants. As articulated by Fine et al. (2000), within qualitative research, the researcher has a social responsibility and obligation to report, frame, and share data in a way that represents the stories and protects participants by making known their own identity, intentions, and positionality.

## **Positionality of the Researcher**

For this study, it was essential that I reflect on, interrogate, and convey my positionality relative to the research being conducted. As shared by Bourke (2014), no one person or researcher can be completely objective. He writes, “Positionality represents a space in which objectivity and subjectivism meet – to achieve a pure objectivism is a naïve quest, and we can never truly divorce ourselves of subjectivity” (Bourke, 2014, p. 3). My beliefs, values systems, and moral stances are components of how I see our social world, all of which could not be separated from this research study. As Bourke (2014) describes, “It is reasonable to expect that the researcher’s beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process” (p. 2). To that point, my privilege as a white educated male played a significant role in the assumptions, goals, and decisions I contemplated as I worked through and prepared analysis for this research study.



As I examined, questioned, and highlighted my own positionality more closely, it was necessary for me to know, communicate, and share my career path in PK-12 teaching and leadership, as well as how I arrived at examining this important topic for my dissertation proposal. I began my career in education as a high school mathematics teacher. In my role of teacher, I had firsthand experiences in the complexities and inequities that resulted from my school's decisions related to mathematics course selection and curriculum development. I often found myself, as a new teacher, instructing courses designed for the school's tracked system that reserved seats for students labeled as struggling, not engaged, and mathematically challenged. What I quickly learned was that my students needed encouragement, real world application, and a positive, growth producing environment to engage in meaningful teaching and learning. By providing the right support, positive attitude, and encouragement, the students were able to meet with success on instructional and curriculum concepts reserved, by our longstanding school system and structures, for the privileged and gifted students (Oakes, 1992). These experiences provided me, as an educator, with the desire and commitment to advocate change and pursue leadership opportunities to better the learning experiences of all students.

As I transitioned my education career to building and school leadership, my desire to advocate, challenge, and address the status quo resulted in leading curriculum discussions and instructional conversations around grading practices, selection criteria, and data to support decisions. As an Assistant Principal and Principal my commitment to students to alter access and create opportunities led to a change and reduction in the number of track options in mathematics and science courses in my school district, as well as a removal of pre-requisite standards for access into accelerated, honors, Advanced Placement (AP), college-level courses.

While the need to advocate and improve the learning experiences of students remained central to my focus as a leader, my desire to ensure equity in student experiences for all students resulted following my transition to district-level leadership positions as an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and instruction and Deputy Superintendent. It is through a district-level lens I began to recognize how privilege, bias, and personal experiences impact teaching and leadership decisions which directly affect the experiences of our students. Within the district roles, I began to look more closely at data, ask specific and meaningful questions to address the achievement gaps of students. This work led to a review of policies, regulations, and procedures, as well as recommendations to the Superintendent of Schools and Board of Education to create more opportunities for students through a strategic plan that addresses every student reaching his or her potential.

Additionally, during this time I rekindled my doctoral studies at Syracuse University and began pursuing a degree focused on educational leadership by leading and transforming complex and diverse schools. It is through my doctoral coursework, reading, reflection and new learning, I started contemplating and recognizing how all of my prior work and desire to support all students did not fully address issues of equity and access. Thus, my desire to lead social justice work by examining more closely issues surrounding academic tracking, acceleration, and leadership, originated. Simultaneously, my thrust into the Acting Superintendent of Schools and Interim Superintendent of Schools roles during a very unprecedented time for our nation's schools with health and safety concerns, racism and discrimination, as well as social emotional and mental wellness needs has created an event greater desire to advocate, support, and lead change for all students, especially the underserved, marginalized, and oppressed.

Moreover, as amplified through my positionality as a leader and advocate for equity, my current role as the Deputy Superintendent of Schools within an organization included within the study's geographic region afforded me a unique insider perspective of power and privilege, which is clearly acknowledged. As articulated by Greene (2014) in addition to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), insider research or perspective is created on the underlying premise that a study involves a researcher's own social group. More specifically, it involves engaging in research with participants of similar characteristics like occupation or leadership role. As previously described, my intimate experience as a district-level leader, working closely with leaders from neighboring school systems provides me with a deeper understanding or knowledge of PK-12 leadership, in addition to the challenges, values, and norms of my participants. As more appropriately described by Chavez (2008) in reference to insider positionality, "the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identify which is aligned or shared with participants" (p. 475). I hold a shared context and knowledge with my participants which allowed me to access and engage in a more natural interaction with my participants (Chavez, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Green, 2014).

As I navigated my own positionality and insider perspective, it was essential for me to engage with the data in a way that did not compromise my ability to reflect critically on the data (Green, 2014). Certainly, honoring my own preconceived philosophical beliefs and bias about how students are discriminated against by educators because of deficit mindsets, acceleration criteria, and lack of advocacy for social justice, culturally responsive instruction, as well as regional efforts to dismantle self-serving and district-specific leadership led me to more transparency and reflection on my own positionality to counterbalance and address potential limitations as a result of my insider perspective and/or power as a district leader.

## **Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research. As described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness occurs when researchers are able to establish credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Shenton (2004), Glesne (2014), and Saldana and Omasta (2018) all suggest a variety of methods to utilize within qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness. Some examples of techniques used by these researchers include: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, member checking, triangulation of data, reflexivity, thick descriptions, and external auditing. In the paragraphs to follow, I describe the techniques used as part of this research study to establish credibility. I do this to provide clarity of my work because Shenton (2004) articulates the primary focus to ensuring credibility or truth in the findings as the most essential component of establishing trustworthiness in research.

To triangulate the data, I used multiple data sources to investigate my research questions and to generate validity and meaning. As described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), triangulation “came to mean that many sources of data were better in a study than a single source because multiple sources lead to fuller understanding of the phenomena” (p. 115). I identified specific categories and themes based on my coding to confirm the data across multiple sources. For example, I analyzed the categories and themes of collaboration and competition to confirm the leaders’ voices and words were transcending into their actions during regional leadership meetings and professional development work sessions. As previously described within the data collection methods and procedures section of this chapter, I used semi-structured and joint interviews with multiple leaders, focus groups, and document / artifact reviews to facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The time spent in the field collecting multiple data

sources, allowed appropriate time for me to develop a rapport, trust, and construct meaning as a researcher within the setting. This prolonged engagement, according to Given (2008) allowed me the time I needed to gain a better understanding of the behaviors, values, beliefs, and realities of the district leaders who served as my study's participants.

Another technique used to elicit trustworthiness for this study was establishing opportunities for member checking. As described by Shenton (2004), as well as Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is one of the most important actions for qualitative researchers to increase a studies credibility. Shenton (2004) states,

Checks relating to the accuracy of the data may take place “on the spot” in the course, and at the end, of the data collection dialogues. Informants may also be asked to read any transcripts of dialogues in which they have participated. Here the emphasis should be on whether the informants consider that their words match what they actually intended. (p. 68)

I used time during the second interviews, the joint interviews with district leaders, and during the focus group meetings to checking back with my participants about the ideas, thoughts, and themes I heard during my interactions with them. My purpose was to clarify and listen as a means of guaranteeing I was capturing, summarizing, and analyzing their words, actions, and statements appropriately. By using member checking as a trustworthiness technique, I was able to give my participants the opportunity to correct my errors, as well as challenge some of the preliminary findings and interpretations of the data.

Reflexivity and reflection served as a primary focus of the study's analysis process. I frequently constructed memos and reflections to interrogate my thoughts, ideas, beliefs,

assumptions, and analysis of the data. As Emerson (2011) suggests, I reflected as the researcher on the “what” and “how” to keep my biases and preconceived notions in check. Certainly, highlighting my own positionality and reflecting and writing about my personal and ethical dilemmas provided strength to my analysis to maintain trustworthiness. As articulated by Saldana (2009), “Reflection keeps you attuned to these matters and may help you brainstorm possible solutions” (p. 38).

Lastly, this study utilized peer review and debriefing sessions and engagements to bring forward scrutiny, challenges, and insights to the study. As described by Shenton (2004), peer reviews should be encouraged. More specifically, Shenton (2004) states,

The fresh perspective that such individuals may be able to bring may allow them to challenge assumptions made by the investigator, whose closeness to the project frequently inhibits his or her ability to view it with real detachment. Questions and observations may well enable the researcher to refine his or her methods, develop a greater explanation of the research design, and strengthen his or her arguments in the light of the comments made. (p. 67)

By establishing opportunities to engage in peer review and debriefing sessions as a trustworthiness technique, I was afforded the ability to establish credibility and truth within my data findings to more accurately ascertain the influences, realities, resistance, and beliefs of district leaders around academic tracking and acceleration in their suburban school districts.

## **Conclusion**

As it stands, not much has changed with tracking and acceleration of students in schools since Oakes (1986) highlighted the need for transformation. This dissertation study expands and

enhances the literature that exists in the area of K-12 leadership, equity, and access within tracking and acceleration systems. It is evident that active and aspiring leaders, as well as other practitioners need a clearer understanding of their role, direction, and guidance required to overcome barriers in shaping progress and disconnect between beliefs, data, and action.

Ultimately, this qualitative study helps educators and advocates understand regional efforts and influence of district leaders. And, as a result of a desire for transformation, contributes to the field by closely examining high-level district leaders, analyzing how they view tracking and acceleration within their organizations, how they attempt to address issues of equity within acceleration and course tracking systems, and how they navigate what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Findings on the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration: Oppressive patterns are allowed to exist**

*"Education is the civil rights issue of our generation."*  
- Arne Duncan (2010)

A focus of this research study is to better understand the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration. This chapter examines the first research question: What are the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration? As such, participants in this study define tracking and acceleration, as well as describe issues they have come to know about tracking and acceleration. Additionally, this chapter explores how students are grouped within each leader's schools. Furthermore, this findings section examines enrollment data, along with policy documentation and artifacts to ascertain the track options available to students within each organization's middle and high schools.

#### **District Leaders define Definition of Tracking**

In order to understand the issues, beliefs, and realities of tracking, it made sense to ask each district leader to define tracking using their own words, thoughts, and ideas. Not surprising, most district leaders defined tracking through the lens of their lived experiences, often citing or referring back to when they were in middle and/or high school. Words and phrases like "old school," "one size fits all," "set in stone," "entitlement," "doesn't work," "restricts access," "creates barriers," and "prevents additional opportunities" all summarize the general sentiments shared by the district leaders when defining and/or describing academic tracking. As Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Samuels stated, "tracking has a negative



connotation,” more specifically, “Just the notion of tracking is like, you don’t have these things, and therefore, you can’t access these courses. That in and of itself by definition sounds like a deficit mentality.”

Superintendent Weagraff of District 4 defined tracking consistent to Oakes, (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) where schools assign students to stratified levels of a course or curriculum that is different, less or more rigorous, than the standard course and/or curriculum.

So, I guess for me, and maybe this is an old model, when I think about tracking, you know back in the day, when I was in elementary school, there was the bluebirds and the blackbirds classes. There was the homogeneous versus heterogeneous aligning of kids. A lot of it had to do with ability and one particular class maybe getting this particular lower level of curriculum and the other group getting perhaps a little bit more. The expectation was that these are the kids [referring to the low ability group level] that are going to do “X”, and these are the kids [referring to the high ability group level] that are probably going to do “Y”. Maybe one group included college preparation and the other group didn't. Of those same kids, some may have been steered into Regents courses, because at the time, when I was in school, Regents courses and exams was an option, it was not an expectation. If you were not in the Regents track, you may be recommended to go to BOCES [Board of Cooperative Educational Services] to learn a trade or specific skill. So, this gives you just an example of what my view is of what that [tracking] looks like. That's what I remember, and you know, fortunately, much of that has been eliminated in most cases today.

It is evident that Superintendent Weagraff’s definition of tracking highlights an educational system of separating and sorting of students based on academic ability. He firmly believes that

what educational institutions have come to know and preserve surrounding academic tracking are outdated practices, and in many cases based on his beliefs, non-existent in today's schools. As the findings of this study are laid out through the next few chapters, the realities of what exists in today's schools, long after the initial work of Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) pointed to the inequities associated to academic tracking, will be illuminated.

In a similar way, Superintendent Williams of District 2, defined academic tracking as “predetermined” or “defined outcomes.”

I would define tracking as slotting students into a predefined outcome. One way, I guess, is beginning with the end in mind, which is you're setting a predefined outcome and, therefore, you restrict the potential opportunities for some students -- that's one way of looking at! And then, I think the other way of looking at it is sort of a de facto predefined outcome by limiting students' opportunities from the outset, and so, therefore, as a result of that they [the students] end up with outcomes to their experiences that may not be fair, or that may be limited in some way.

As apparent, Superintendent Williams's definition of tracking highlights a very clear “deficit” aspect / mindset / component of academic tracking. From his perspective and/or point of view, tracking has no place in schools because it limits educational opportunities, experiences, and options for students.

In another way, Superintendent Allen of District 6 defined tracking in the simplest and most succinct of ways. She stated, “Tracking in my mind is when you intentionally predetermine someone's next steps without them [referring to students] having necessarily real input into that learning pathway.” This definition of academic tracking amplifies the power dynamics associated with gatekeepers to course learning and curriculum options. Clearly stated, it is

unlikely students, and even their families [parents and guardians], have real influence over which learning pathways they [the students] experience in middle and high school. Similarly, Superintendent Skinner of District 5 shared thoughts of tracking and the power dynamics related to gatekeepers by referring to staff members who negatively influence student placement outcomes as “dream killers”. She shares,

Are we messaging to kids to take a challenge? Are we influencing them in a way that elevates them to take a challenge, or to desire the challenge? Are we influencing them by saying I don’t think this is right for you? We have talked a lot about this over the last six years here. We are not the dream killers! You have to watch [course trends and enrollment data] what does the gateway to the possibilities look like for your students and who’s exclude and who’s included. If you don’t pay attention to that [data] you create a system that’s negative. If you pay attention to the gateway and who has access, you are creating something very powerful for the kids...We hold a lot of influence over kids!

Clearly from the district leader role of Superintendent of Schools, we reaffirm the belief that educators including district and building leaders, teachers, and school counselors hold major influence for the courses and pathways that students embark as they navigate their middle and high school years.

While it was fascinating to examine each Superintendent’s thoughts, ideas, and definitions of tracking, it was also very telling to understand the perspective of their high-ranking counterparts in the area of curriculum and instruction personnel. Similar to the Superintendents, the Assistant Superintendents for Curriculum and Instruction, as well as Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, interviewed as part of this research study provided relatively consistent descriptions of academic tracking in their middle and high schools; however, some expanded their thoughts

by offering specific examples of what structures, systems, and criteria are utilized in schools to construct ability groupings or academic tracks for students.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Samuels of District 2, described the outcome of academic tracking on what an unintended outcome of a student's experience can be as a result of a placement decision. He shares,

I feel like tracking is sort of saying that we're going to group students together intentionally around a dimension of identity. In addition, I think, what happens frequently within tracking, in my own head, is that there are also implications for the rest of that student's day...Like, a specific course enrollment then turns into how I'm [referring to the specific student] grouped with the same group of kids for the same subjects, for the entire day, for one decision [made by adults] based on one thing. That is sort of, what I think about with tracking, and is kind of like the worst-case scenario.

In the same way, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Lassard described the sorting of students into groups based on standardized test scores and set / established criteria.

I often think of tracking as a minimalist having three tracks. You have your students that are performing at or around grade level. You have this accelerated class where kids are going to get opportunities and for many different reasons you often have, like when I went to high school, classes that were very low. You had classes for students who either were not motivated, were not performing well academically, did not do well on standardized tests...So, I think tracking is generally having three levels, usually there's some kind of a criteria that defines which way you're going to be destined to go, and maybe a standardized test, maybe your grades, or may also be a teacher recommendation.

Clearly, student performance and policy or practice criteria created conditions that affect placement of students within our schools. As articulated by Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Lassard, these predefined conditions set the pathway students are “destined to go.”

Assistant Superintendent Lampman of District 5 describes academic tracking in a very personalized way consistent to the way in which some of the Superintendents defined tracking. Assistant Superintendent Lampman based her thoughts from a vantage point of having personal experiences working in various school settings and by raising her own children.

When I think about course tracking I think about looking at your student population and whatever grade level and sort of determining what the best fit is for that kid based on their performance. I think my definition is probably a little old fashioned because there's a little less tracking here [referring to her district]. I feel like this only because we're a tiny school and there's not a ton of staff to offer you know, a ton of different tracks.

When I sort of think of my past experiences in other districts, kids who excel and do well, often get put into advanced level classes, and I think about my own child who is in honors classes right now, in AP® and all honors as a as a sophomore. So, when I think about tracking it's about assessing certain students at certain levels and then pushing them into advance tracks or even general tracks. That's how I view it.

Clearly, in this case, the perspective of district leader while based on their own experiences, is dependent on other factors like the structure and size of the school district, staffing needs, and the school or district’s ability to offer a variety of options for students.

In a roundabout way, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Pope described a transformation her district is attempting to make in how they view and support academic tracking. From her perspective she shared a traditional system of tracking changing to a system of pathways and supports for all students.

When I started to think about tracking I feel like we are all starting to make this shift in tracking students. So, the old way of tracking was thinking about students who were being tracked based on academics, right you? You have students who are in specialized programs and special education. You have your average students and then you have your high fliers who were maybe in acceleration... We are starting to make the shift from, I mean tracking still exists because of mandates and requirements with special education and we still have requirements for acceleration, but I think the shift is really becoming more about pathways for students and less about the academic piece. So, it's more so where do we, where do these students want to go when they leave us in. We are beginning to monitor students based on how can we set them up to be successful when they leave us.

As a way of bringing the thoughts and ideas from all of the Assistant Superintendents, Directors, and Superintendents together, Superintendent Skinner of District 5 offers what may be an opportunistic and growth viewpoint associated to academic tracking as all leaders navigate supporting all students and meeting their individual needs.

Tracking is where levels are created within a system based on a student's need. It may be that a student needs more of a challenge than they might get in another situation because the kids that are in that situation need a slower pace or a different approach. Obviously, as we learn and improve, if we ever get there [referring to] more personalized learning

and more differentiating, I mean, truly being able to differentiate in a classroom, is a way from the one size fits all model associated with tracking.

In summary, each district leader has made sense of academic tracking through the lens of their lived experiences. Not surprisingly, a very traditional and deficit focused view of academic tracking continues to persist in our middle and high schools, one where educators intentionally or unintentionally assign students to stratified levels of different courses and curriculums that are very different. More specifically, tracking can be summarized separating students by academic ability into groups for subjects or certain classes and curriculum. Furthermore, as represented by all of the statements shared by the district leaders, the participants of this study clearly articulate or imply through their own words, thoughts, and ideas that tracking is outdated and non-existent within their school districts. More specifically, seven (7) out of twelve (12) participants of this study believe that tracking does not exist within their districts and schools. This calculates to approximately fifty-eight percent (58%) of the district leaders. Interestingly, only one (1) Superintendent of Schools believes that tracking exists, while four (4) Assistant Superintendents / Directors of Curriculum and Instruction believe the same. That being shared, I use district course enrollment data in a later section of this chapter to point out that academic tracking still exists within the district leaders' schools even though for the majority their words tell a different story. In the next section, district leaders expand their thoughts and ideas one specific tier of academic tracking by defining academic acceleration.

### **District Leaders define Definition of Acceleration**

In order to understand the issues, beliefs, and realities of acceleration, it made sense to ask each district leader to define academic acceleration using their own words, thoughts, and ideas. Words and phrases like “innovation,” “students learn at different rates,” “extension

activities,” “opportunities to jump across different pathways,” “moving faster,” “dirty word,” “criteria,” and “viewed as inequity” all summarize the general sediments shared by the district leaders when defining and/or describing academic acceleration. As anticipated, most district leaders defined acceleration consistent to what is expressed within the works and research of Burris (2010) and Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). More specifically, acceleration is more appropriately defined as students taking a course at one grade or more challenging course level while they receive simultaneous credit for an equivalent course at a higher grade or course level.

Superintendent Skinner defined acceleration as, “Students entering into a course that in the traditional model, they would not be experiencing at that grade level. So that's acceleration...whatever construct we have for what you're [referring to students] supposed to do as a ninth grader, you're doing something that would be considered a level beyond that.”

Similarly, Superintendent Williams indicated that, “Acceleration, I think, is the opportunity for students to either think more deeply or move a little bit faster through a curriculum.”

Superintendent Williams unique perspective about students engaging “more deeply” into the curriculum highlights an academic advantage for students afforded the opportunity to experience accelerated course offerings.

Furthermore, Superintendent Allen points to a comparison to a “traditional” model as she defines acceleration.

Acceleration to me is that you're going to be completing the same required courses or classwork but you're going to do it in a shorter period of time or moment or you're going to be allowed to accelerate to a level above in a shorter period of time then in the traditional framework or model.



Director of Curriculum and Instruction Pope provides a description connected to the benefits of acceleration as they relate to access to rigorous academic coursework including advanced and college-level offerings as she defines acceleration.

Students have the opportunity to take high school level courses in elementary or in middle school. Then when the student is in high school they end up having time because they finished things quicker, so they finished the math sequence quicker, so, they [the student] has more opportunities to take college-level math courses, or even other elective courses...It kind of opens up their schedule, so they have more opportunities. Therefore, acceleration is just a faster pace through the curricular sequence for students.

Assistant Superintendent Lassard quite simply defines acceleration as opportunities for students.

Lassard stated, “You have this accelerated class where kids are going to get opportunities.”

Similarly, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Pope expanded upon acceleration as opportunities to include it as a right for students. Pope shared:

So, the old way of acceleration would be academics where students have the opportunity to take high school level courses in elementary or in middle school. And then through high school they end up having [time in their scheduled] because they finished things quicker, so [because] they finished the math sequence quicker, they have more opportunities to take college level math courses, or even other elective courses. It kind of opens up their schedule, so they have more opportunities. And so, acceleration is just that faster paced through the curricular sequence for students.

While some of the district leaders shared their thoughts and ideas of acceleration as opportunities and rights, one of the district leaders highlighted the type of student that secures the right or ability to participate in acceleration programs. Assistant Superintendent Lampman specified:

Kids who excel and do well often get put in. I think about my own child who is in honors classes, right now, at District 2, you know, he's in AP [Advanced Placement] and all honors classes as a sophomore. So, when I think about tracking and acceleration it's that – it's assessing certain students at certain levels and then pushing them to advance tracks as opposed to general tracks.

Superintendent Fanton provided a rather opportunistic perspective on acceleration based on his view of tracking. Fanton detailed:

Well it is interesting – I think tracking sounds limiting to me, but I think acceleration doesn't. But tracking to me sounds like it's setting a trajectory for someone rather than just an impetus or an opportunity tracking can sound like it's been a guided decision as to where you'll go rather than there's a whole host of different ways you can explore this and how can I help to guide your process if it's a student with parents, etc.. Acceleration, it's funny – I just recently thought of when Carmelo Anthony decided to leave the team and Coach Boeheim supported him by saying 'Look – college gets you ready for what's next in life and Carmelo is ready!' Rather than going on to the degree thing, it was almost as if saying, 'Why would Carmelo need a degree?' Of course, you want him to stay around, but he is ready and so we have partly done our job. I think acceleration has to be answered by, you know, 'Where are you headed and how can we get you there?' It is part of the definitions of comprehensive educational experiences – opportunity! I think, where we struggle, maybe not with acceleration necessarily but with time because we

simply can't have everybody have everything on the menu. If you do, you're ordering eight desserts and that's not, you know, where the analogy is headed. So, I think I understand acceleration as if somebody's ready and it's appropriate.

Expanding upon the opportunistic view of acceleration, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' described acceleration as extending learning and equitable access to learning standards. Dube' defined:

Acceleration, in traditional terms of acceleration are things or those courses that are extending learning. I would say our, you know, AP [Advanced Placement], SUPA [Syracuse University Project Advance], middle school Regents classes, enrichment, and those types of things. I like to think as a district, I hope that we continue to push this idea of learning acceleration means that all kids are getting equitable access to grade level standards and they're getting the support that they need in the in the midst of that to make up for any unfinished learning or any learning gaps. So, I don't I know, I suppose that's probably not your traditional viewpoint of acceleration.

Lastly, Assistant Superintendent Samuels and Superintendent Fulton quite succinctly define acceleration as exposing students to above grade-level standards in higher curriculum courses. Samuels stated:

So, I feel like acceleration for me it's like working above what typical grade level standards would be. So, for instance, like if you are in seventh grade you're working on eighth grade mathematics. That to me is like you're being accelerated.

While Superintendent Fulton shared, "Acceleration is placing students in kind of higher curricular courses and exposing them to content that most students are not equally provided."

In summary, it is evident that each district leader has made sense of what it means to define academic acceleration. Not unpredictably, acceleration is rather consistently defined as students taking a course at one grade or more challenging course level while they receive simultaneous credit for an equivalent course at a higher grade or course level (Burris, 2010; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). A very opportunistic constructed view of acceleration centered on advantages and access in our middle and high schools persists from the vantage point of the district leaders as opposed to their opinions that academic tracking is considered a thing of the past. In the next section, I analyze Board of Education policies from participants' district to ascertain how the policies and regulations influence academic tracking and acceleration options for students in their middle and high schools.

### **Policy Comparison**

Reflecting on various student-specific and instruction-based Board of Education policies provide unique insights into the perspectives, practices, and associated decisions of district leaders, which intentionally or unintentionally influence tracking and course acceleration within middle and high schools. The analysis and comparison of various documents provides a better understanding of how social, historical, and organizational structures and systems perpetuate a desire for change consistent with data gleaned from the semi-structured and focus group interviews. Understanding how leaders believe or articulate how they are striving for equity and opportunity for all students, work within and around policies and practices, is an interesting and complex dynamic to this study. The artifacts examined provide a context for further reflection by district leaders desirous of change and a rationale for leaders to rethink and define programming and pathways to address inequity, opportunity gaps, accountability, and representation of all students.

Within this section the policies associated to grade promotion and placement, accelerated programs and dual credit courses, as well as basic instructional programs was reviewed.

Fascinatingly, four of the six school districts have identical approved Board of Education policies, which address the grade promotion and placement of students. The specific language communicated within the policy directly affects opportunities for students resulting in tracked systems of learning and placement. More specifically, the policy states,

Grade promotion and the placement of students within the District's instructional system, shall be at the discretion of the school administration and shall be subject to review at any time. In making such decisions, the administrator or Building Principal will be guided by performance in class, past records, including various measures of student growth; parent/guardian and teacher recommendations, and any other appropriate sources of information. With regard to student placement decisions, the parent/guardian may submit written requests for teacher attributes that would best serve their child's learning needs; however, requests for specific teachers will not be honored. Final placement decisions shall rest with the school administration.

It is clear from language within this specific policy that institutionalized practices, like the review of class performance, teacher recommendations, and other student growth measures all influence decision-makers resulting in a variety of finalized placement options for students. More specifically, the building administration / building principal embraces significant power over others, including teachers, counselors, parents, and students, to affect a student's learning trajectory base on the approved language with the document. Additionally, the portion of the policy specific to student placement decisions ["the parent/guardian may submit written requests for teacher attributes that would best serve their child's learning needs; however, requests for

specific teachers will not be honored”] represents institutionalized practices centered on elementary aged students. This significance coincides with research by Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) indicating that tracking begins as early as kindergarten where placement decisions are made by classroom teachers and building principals.

Another policy that four of the six schools embraced had language around accelerated programs and dual credit for college courses. More specifically, the policy articulated the “who,” “what,” and “how” students are provided with opportunity to engage in advanced programming and course credit attainment. The language below further highlights policies that create limitations and/or restrict access for many students.

#### Eighth Grade Acceleration for Diploma Credits

Individual eighth grade students only may be afforded the opportunity to take high school courses in mathematics and in at least one of the following areas: English, social studies, languages other than English, art, music, career and technical education subjects, or science courses. The Superintendent or his/her designee is responsible for determining that an eighth-grade student is eligible to take high school courses. The District shall utilize a set of criteria to determine each student's readiness for acceleration. Students who are accelerated for diploma credit must have been provided instruction designed to facilitate their attainment of, by the end of Grade 7, the State intermediate learning standards in each subject area in which they are accelerated.

When examining the policy closely, language like “Eighth grade students may take appropriate high school courses.” could send mixed messages to students and families. While the language, on the surface, appears to open opportunities for all students, the attention to “may” and “appropriate” leaves question regarding the actual accessibility for all students. This language is

likely be interpreted as reinforcing a tracked system of academic programming because it emphasizes “appropriate high school course” (delineating more than one option for students). This language maintains the status quo of a tracked system of academics which creates inequity, opportunity gaps, and limits opportunities for our most marginalized and underrepresented students. As such, this is counter-productive to socially just leadership practices.

Additionally, the language, “The Superintendent of Schools or his/her designee will determine whether an eighth-grade student is eligible to take high school courses using criteria that examines each student's readiness.” This language situates power with individuals not directly connected to the student, which amplifies the power imbalance between administration, teachers, parents, and students. Again, this creates conflict with interpretation of unstated and stated purposes and expectations of criteria – It is not clear!

Furthermore, the last portion of the text, “By the end of seventh grade, accelerated students must receive instruction designed to facilitate their attainment of the state intermediate learning standards in each subject area in which they are accelerated.” emphasizes an assumed purpose to ensure that students have been enrolled in coursework that prepared them and ensures they have been provided instruction of all learning standards prior to enrolling in the accelerated/high school level courses. The unstated purpose of this language represents a deficit point of view (line of thinking) and limits access of students.

Also, and interestingly stated, the policy sets forth or establishes a requirement for district leaders to create a set of criteria to determine readiness of each student. Based on conversations with the district level leaders some of the leaders were unable to specify the established criteria for their districts and referred back to building principals and teachers teams making the determination about student readiness. As an example, Superintendent Williams of District 2

shared, “To be honest with you, I can't tell you the criteria that's used to move students into the accelerated programming.”

Furthermore, some of the districts highlighted a grade-point average of at least an 85% or 90% along with high scores on New York State Assessments in ELA, mathematics, and science as being a part of the criteria for determining readiness. In so much, it is evident that the criteria is unique to each district, even though the policy appears universal to many of the participating school districts. Certainly, more detailed communication to students and families is required so they are able to fully understand the expectations of the policy as it relates to accelerating for diploma credit as opposed to becoming a barrier to access of this option.

#### Advanced Placement

Advanced Placement (AP®) examinations are administered by the College Board with strict guidelines as to their implementation. A national, standardized, arduous examination is administered by the College Board in May of each year for a great variety of courses in various subject areas. In addition to entering a universe of knowledge that might otherwise remain unexplored in high school, Advance Placement examinations afford students the opportunity to earn credit or advanced standing in most of the nation's colleges and universities. The District shall utilize a set of criteria to determine a student's readiness for enrollment in the Advanced Placement classes.

Again, the policy requires district leaders to use a set of criteria to determine the readiness of each student. Similarly, and based on conversations with the district level leaders the leaders indicated recommendations and success in prior advance level courses as a determining factor of whether a student meets the criteria for Advanced Placement enrollment. That being stated, at



least 4 of the 6 district leaders indicated they have strived within their districts to open enrollment in AP® classes by eliminating pre-requisite and teacher recommendation criteria.

#### Dual Credit for College Courses

All students who have successfully fulfilled the requirements to enter into their senior year and have demonstrated intellectual and social maturity may choose to matriculate at any one of the colleges that have a cooperative agreement with our School District. Such opportunities may include early admission to college, collegiate-level work offered in the high school or other means of providing advanced work. Review and approval by the administration are necessary before any college course may be taken during the school day.

In the end, when I think about the NYS Education Department's (2018) push to ensure equity and access for all students, as well as our current political and social climate, the language within the policy (on appearance) supports those efforts. Although, deep analysis and examination generates more questions than answers and forces leaders and policy makers to think more critically regarding their intentions to support all students, especially those students most marginalized and discriminated against because of their race, gender, ability, or other identity.

As will all Board of Education policies, the documents are comprised of structure, principles, and collection of rules/requirements that govern the operation of education systems. As we know, education occurs in many forms and for many purposes through many institutions. While policies certainly formalize expectations for community members, families, students, and staff, they also reinforce a hierarchical structure associated to academic tracking and acceleration which can be difficult to change / challenge. In the next section, I transition from policy to

practice with the intent and focus of highlighting the instructional decisions occurring with the district leaders' middle and high schools.

### **Practice Comparison – Track Options within Schools**

While policies often influence the practices and expectations of district leaders and other educators like teachers and counselors, cases exist where alignment of policy and practice isn't always a reliable predictor to what is actually occurring in secondary classrooms. In this section of the findings chapter, I use data from participating schools to better understand the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration by answering the following research question: What are the acceleration and track options in each organization's middle and high schools? To summarize the findings for this area, Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 categorize the available track options and course offerings by department at the middle and high school levels for each participating school district. The information gathered from leaders to yield the data represented in both tables was downloaded from each district's student information system. The data represents all course offerings available to students during the 2020-2021 school year. As a means for simplifying and characterizing each of the three academic tracks, I have chosen to represent or label the lowest academic form of track option as "Local" with "Regents" representing the middle (i.e., majority) academic-level track, and "Advanced" representing the premier, most rigorous / challenging of the three track options. As predicted, the "Advanced" track contains accelerated, Advanced Placement (AP®), college-level and/or honors-level courses offered in schools.

#### ***Middle School Options***

As represented by Table 4.1, all districts participating in this study offer three track options (i.e., "Local," "Regents," and "Advanced") at the middle school level in the academic

area of mathematics. In all but one case, the “Advanced” course offerings means that accelerated courses are offered to students within each school. Some examples of specific middle school “Advanced” Courses in mathematics are Accelerated Math 7 and Enrichment Math 6. In one case (District 6), the “Advanced” course offering in mathematics only is represented by both accelerated and honors-level mathematics course offerings, which further stratifies the track options available for students at the middle school level.

In the discipline of English / English language arts, half of the school districts, three out of six, offered three levels of course tracking (i.e., “Local,” “Regents,” and “Advanced”) and half of the districts, three out of six, offered two levels of course tracking (i.e., “Local” and “Regents”). Interestingly, the “Advanced” track options in the districts represented honors-level course designations available to students, as opposed to accelerated course options. Some examples of specific middle school “Advanced” Courses in the area of English / English language arts are English 7 Honors and English Language Arts 6 Honors. An example of a specific middle school “Local” Course in the area of English / English language arts is English 7 Special Class. An example of a specific middle school “Regents” Course in the area of English / English language arts is English Language Arts 8.

In the academic area of social studies, one third of the school districts, two out of six, offered three levels of course tracking (i.e., “Local,” “Regents,” and “Advanced”), one third of the districts, two out of six, offered two levels of course tracking (i.e., “Local” and “Regents”), and one third of the districts, two out of six, offered only one level of course tracking (i.e., “Regents”). An example of specific middle school “Advanced” Course in the area of Social Studies is Social Studies 7 Honors. An example of a specific middle school “Local” Course in the area of Social Studies is Social Studies 8 Special Class. An example of a specific middle

school “Regents” Course in the area of Social Studies is Social Studies 6. Arguably, it can be inferred that students in District 1 and District 5 experience a more equitable, consistent, and heterogeneous learning experience given they all take the same social studies course, thus being exposed to the same academic curriculum in their middle schools.

In the area of science instruction, half of the districts, three out of six, offer three track options (i.e., “Local,” “Regents,” and “Advanced”), while two districts, two out of six, offer two track options (i.e., “Regents” and “Advanced”), and one school district, one out of six, offers only one course track option. Some examples of specific middle school “Advanced” Courses in science are Living Environment and Science 7 Honors. An example of a specific middle school “Local” Course in the area of Science is Science 7 Special Class. An example of a specific middle school “Regents” Course in the area of Science is Science 6.

In the area of World Languages, half of the districts, three out of six, offer two track options (i.e., “Regents” and “Local”), and half of the school districts, three out of six, offer only one course track option (i.e., “Regents”). Examples of specific middle school “Regents” Courses in the area of World Languages are Italian 1 and Latin 1. Examples of specific middle school “Local” Courses in the area of World Languages are Spanish 7A and French 7B.

Lastly, it is noted that for mostly all other academic departments and/or disciplines of study (art, business, family and consumer sciences, health, physical education, and technology) only one course track option is available to students in all districts. In the area of music, one district, one out of six, served as an outlier and offered both “Advanced” and “Regents” track options for students. Examples of specific middle school “Regents” Courses in other academic departments are Technology 8 and Art 7. An example of a specific middle school “Advanced” Course in other academic departments is Advanced Orchestra.

In summary, it is evident that most districts offer multiple track options (i.e., “Advanced,” “Local,” and “Regents”) to students in the core content areas. Additionally, it is also apparent that most districts offer one-track option in encore academic areas. Encore classes in PK-12 schools are classes that are not considered core academic classes like art, business, family and consumer sciences, health, physical education, and technology. Overall, and as expected, all of the participant school districts begin to officially sort and select students through formalizing the various track options available to students at the middle school level.

Table 4.1 Middle School Track Options – by District and Department

		Middle School Course Offerings by Department												
	Track Level	Art	Business	English	Family & Consumer Sciences	Health	Math	Music	PE	Science	Social Studies	Spec. Ed	Tech	World Languages
District 1	Advanced						•							
	Regents	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Local			•			•							•
District 2	Advanced	•		•			•			•	•			
	Regents	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Local			•			•			•	•			•
District 3	Advanced	•	•	•			•	•		•	•			
	Regents	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Local			•			•			•	•	•		•
District 4	Advanced						•			•				
	Regents	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Local			•			•				•			
District 5	Advanced						•			•				
	Regents	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Local			•			•							
District 6	Advanced			•			•			•				
	Regents	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Local			•			•			•	•			

### ***High School Options***

As represented by Table 4.2 all districts participating in this study offer three track options (i.e., “Local,” “Regents,” and “Advanced”) in the core content academic areas of

mathematics, English, and social studies. Some examples of high school “Local” Courses include Foundations of Algebra, Basic Economics, AIS (Academic Intervention Services) Global History, and Humanities 12. Examples of high school “Regents” Courses are English 11 Regents, US History, Geometry, and Journalism. Examples of high school “Advanced” Courses include Algebra 2 & Trigonometry Honors, AP English Language and Composition, College Prep Chemistry Honors and SUPA (Syracuse University Project Advance) Economics.

In all but one case, the options are similar for the core content area of science with the exception being secondary offerings within District 5. More specifically, the track options within District 5 are limited to two: “Advanced” and “Regents” course offerings. There is no “Local” or “lower-level” track option for students at the high school; however, District 5 does differentiate the “Advanced” track options by offering both accelerated and honors-level courses to students creating greater stratification of students designated within the “Advanced” track. That being stated, some of the courses offered in science include the following: AP Biology, Living Environment, Earth Science, Global Environment, and Honors Chemistry.

As noted in Table 4.2, 5 of the 6 districts participate in BOCES programming which affords students the opportunities to engage in career and technical education (CTE) courses. Some examples of the BOCES “Local” course offerings are CDOS Applied Science – Retail & Food Service, Career Development, and Consumer Math. Some examples of the BOCES “Regents” course offerings are Health, New Visions – Engineering, and New Visions - Criminal Justice.

Also highlighted in Table 4.2, 4 of the 6 districts offer Special Education course offerings. More specifically, 3 of the 4 districts offer one track of Special Education course offerings at the “Local” track, while 1 of the 4 districts offers two tracks – one at the “Local” and

one at the “Regents” level. Some examples of “Local” courses under the department of Special Education include Earth Science – Special Class and Foundations of Algebra. An example of a “Regents” course under the department of Special Education is Adaptive Physical Education (APE).

Correspondingly, as represented in Table 4.2 and similar to each district’s middle school offerings, the encore course offerings consistently focus on developing knowledge, learning, and experiences for students through a single academic track like health, physical education, technology, and FACS. Likewise, occasional differences within a single department or content area provide minimal additional track options for students.

Table 4.2 High School Track Options – by District and Department

<i>Track Level</i>	<u>High School Course Offerings by Department</u>													
	Art	BOCES	Business	English	Family & Consumer Sciences	Health	Math	Music	PE	Science	Social Studies	Spec. Ed	Tech	World Languages
<b>District 1</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●			●	●		●	●		●	●
	<i>Regents</i>	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Local</i>		●	●			●			●	●			●
<b>District 2</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●			●	●		●	●			●
	<i>Regents</i>	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Local</i>		●	●			●			●	●			
<b>District 3</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●			●	●		●	●			●
	<i>Regents</i>	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Local</i>		●	●			●			●	●	●		●
<b>District 4</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●			●			●	●			●
	<i>Regents</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	<i>Local</i>		●	●			●			●	●	●		●
<b>District 5</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●			●	●		●	●		●	●
	<i>Regents</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Local</i>		●	●			●				●	●		
<b>District 6</b>	<i>Advanced</i>	●		●	●		●		●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Regents</i>	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	<i>Local</i>			●			●			●	●	●	●	

In summary, it is evident that most districts offer multiple track options (i.e., “Advanced,” “Local,” and “Regents”) to students in the core content areas. More specifically, all 6 districts offer three-track options in the areas of English, mathematics, science, and social studies and 3 of the 6 districts offer three-track options in the World Languages.

Additionally, it is also apparent that most districts offer only one-track or two-track options in encore academic areas. More specifically, all 6 districts offer a two-track option in art, 5 of 6 districts in BOCES, and 4 of 6 districts in music and business. Overall, all of the participant school districts offer a variety of track and course to students at the high school level.

### **Trends with Course Enrollment**

In this section of the findings chapter a clearer picture of how leaders, educators, school systems and structures group students within organizations is derived. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of each student, school district leaders provided data from their student information systems which included only the following for each enrolled student: gender, ethnicity, grade-level, course department, name of the course, IEP status, LEP Status, and 504 status. It is important to note that the records and the resultant data findings provided through a variety of figures (Figure 4.3 to Figure 4.37) and tables (Table 4.3 to Table 4.37), as well as analyzed within this section could only be shared in totality of all course placements/enrollments. The data was not able to be isolated / broken down for each individual or unique student. More specifically, this means the data is not able to be analyzed by specific students to determine if students are taking more than one “Advanced” class/course, all “Advanced” classes/courses, a combination of “Advanced”, “Local”, and “Regents” level classes/courses. Furthermore, it is my belief that if the analysis was able to be further isolated to



a unique student the data would appear further disproportionate as represented in the remaining figures and tables within this section which would exasperate the inequity I am able to represent in this study's data. Nevertheless, the collected data is powerful and helps highlight how the complex disparities that exist within the participants' middle and high schools.

Moreover, the acceleration and track enrollment data in each organization's middle and high schools is represented across areas of identity and diversity utilizing the three track options (i.e., "Local," "Regents," and "Advanced") available to students in each district. More specifically, Figures 4.3 through 4.9 and Tables 4.3 through 4.9 represent the course enrollments in districts by race and ethnicity, Figures 4.10 through 4.16 and Tables 4.10 through 4.16 represent the course enrollments in districts by gender, Figures 4.17 through 4.23 and Tables 4.17 through 4.23 represent the course enrollments in districts by disability and ability level status as defined by receiving special education programming and services, Figures 4.24 through 4.30 and Tables 4.24 through 4.30 represent the course enrollments in districts by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status, along with Figures 4.31 through 4.37 and Tables 4.31 through 4.37 representing the course enrollments in districts by Section 504 status as defined by receiving accommodations and services.

### ***Race and Ethnicity***

Student enrollment in courses within all districts is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.3 and Table 4.3. The data highlights Asian students are disproportionately greater represented in "Advanced" courses and disproportionately less in "Local" courses. Similarly, white students are placed in "Advanced" courses at a higher percentage rate than in "Local" courses when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. Black or African American,

Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial students are all disproportionately over represented in “Local” courses and underrepresented in “Advanced” courses.

Figure 4.3 All Districts Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

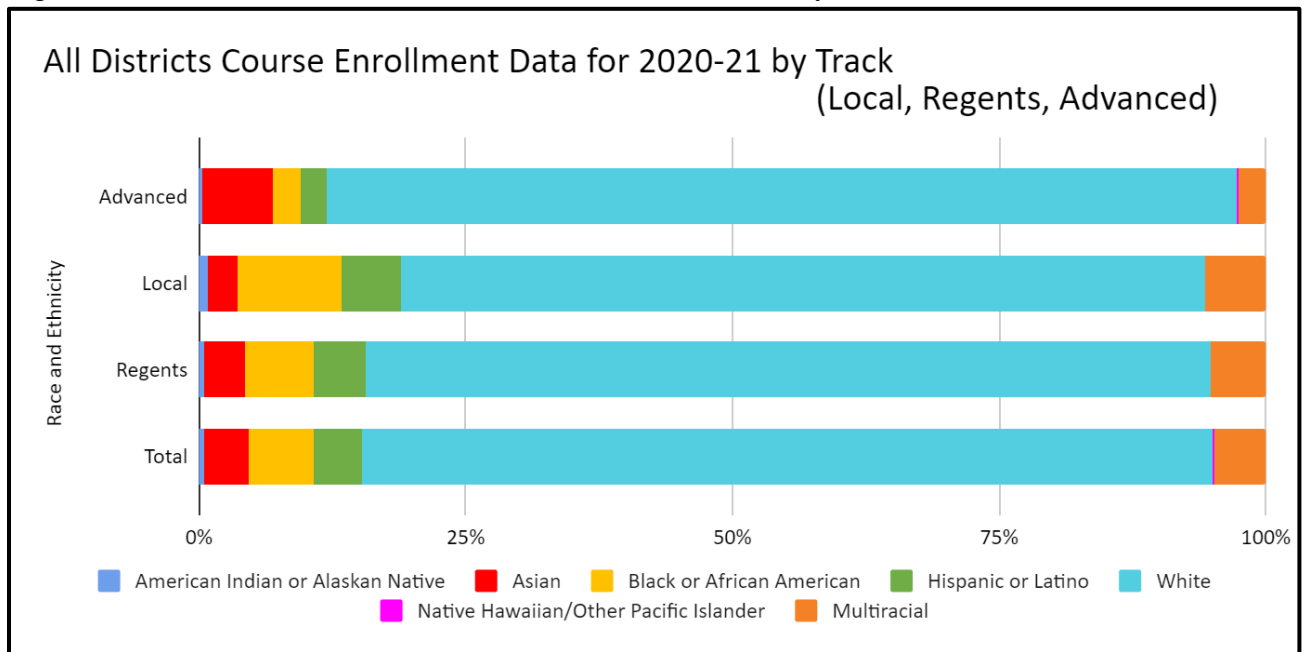


Table 4.3 All Districts Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	12115	5139	87372	104626
American Indian or Alaskan Native	42	41	412	495
Asian	803	143	3369	4315
Black or African American	305	499	5678	6482
Hispanic or Latino	293	293	4146	4732
Multiracial	320	293	4496	5109
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3	2	63	68
White	10349	3868	69208	83425

Student enrollment in courses within District 1 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.4 and Table 4.4. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in

“Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. Consequently, multiracial students have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses followed by Hispanic or Latino students and black or African American students.

Figure 4.4 District 1 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

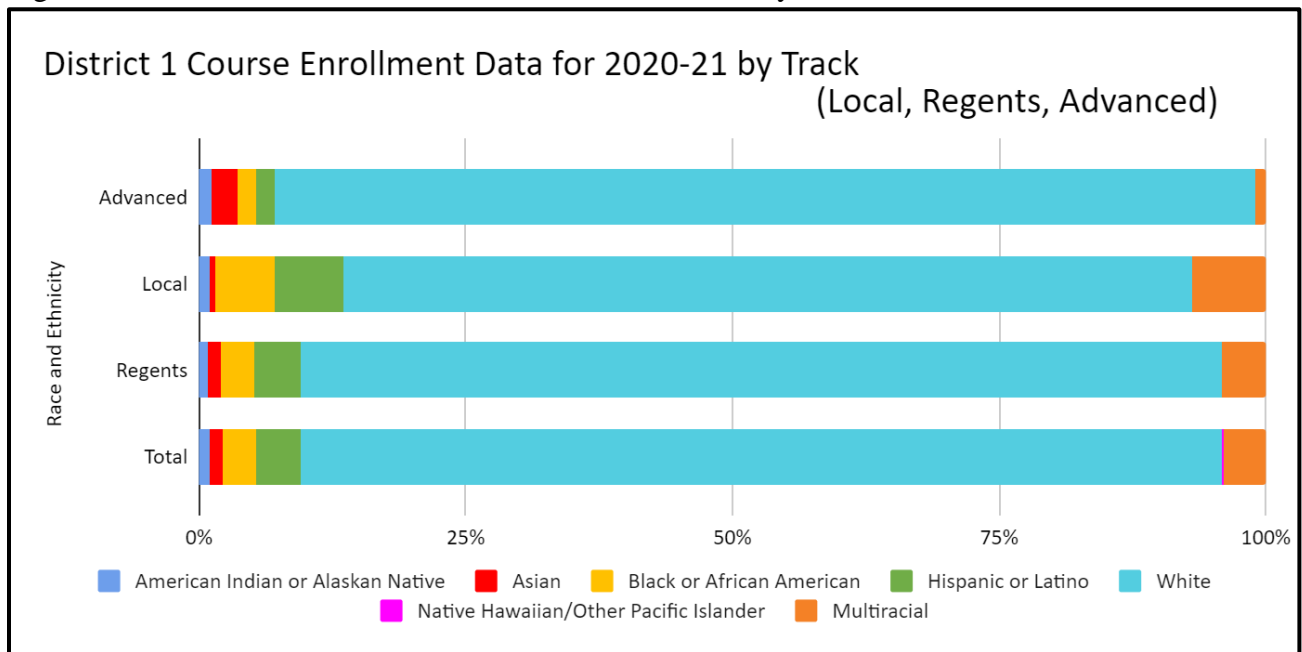


Table 4.4 District 1 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1491	1067	12101	14659
American Indian or Alaskan Native	17	11	108	136
Asian	36	5	150	191
Black or African American	26	60	376	462
Hispanic or Latino	28	68	519	615
Multiracial	16	73	490	579
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	14	14
White	1368	850	10444	12662

Student enrollment in courses within District 2 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.5 and Table 4.5. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. As a result, American Indian or Alaskan Native have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses followed by students black or African American students and Hispanic or Latino students.

Figure 4.5 District 2 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

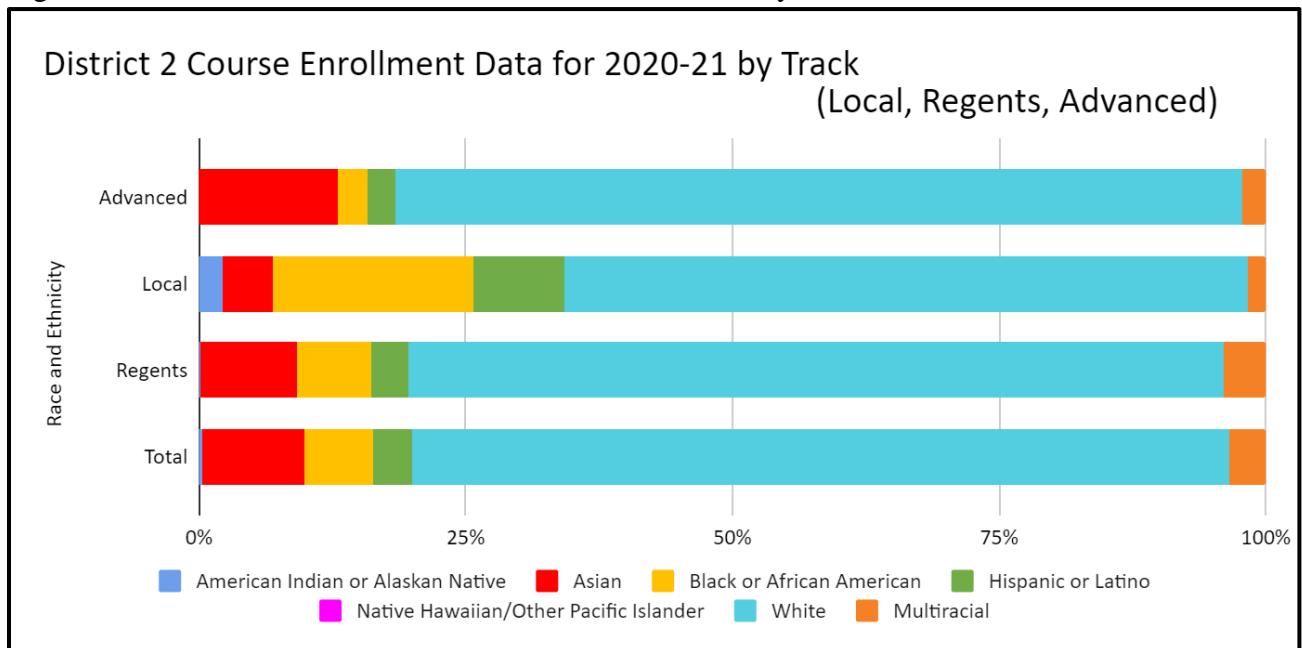


Table 4.5 District 2 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1874	350	6567	8791
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	8	13	21
Asian	243	16	590	849
Black or African American	52	66	454	572
Hispanic or Latino	51	30	231	312
Multiracial	42	6	256	304
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	1486	224	5023	6733

Student enrollment in courses within District 3 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.6 and Table 4.6. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. As a result, black or African American students have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses followed by students Hispanic or Latino students and American Indian or Alaskan Native students.

Figure 4.6 District 3 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

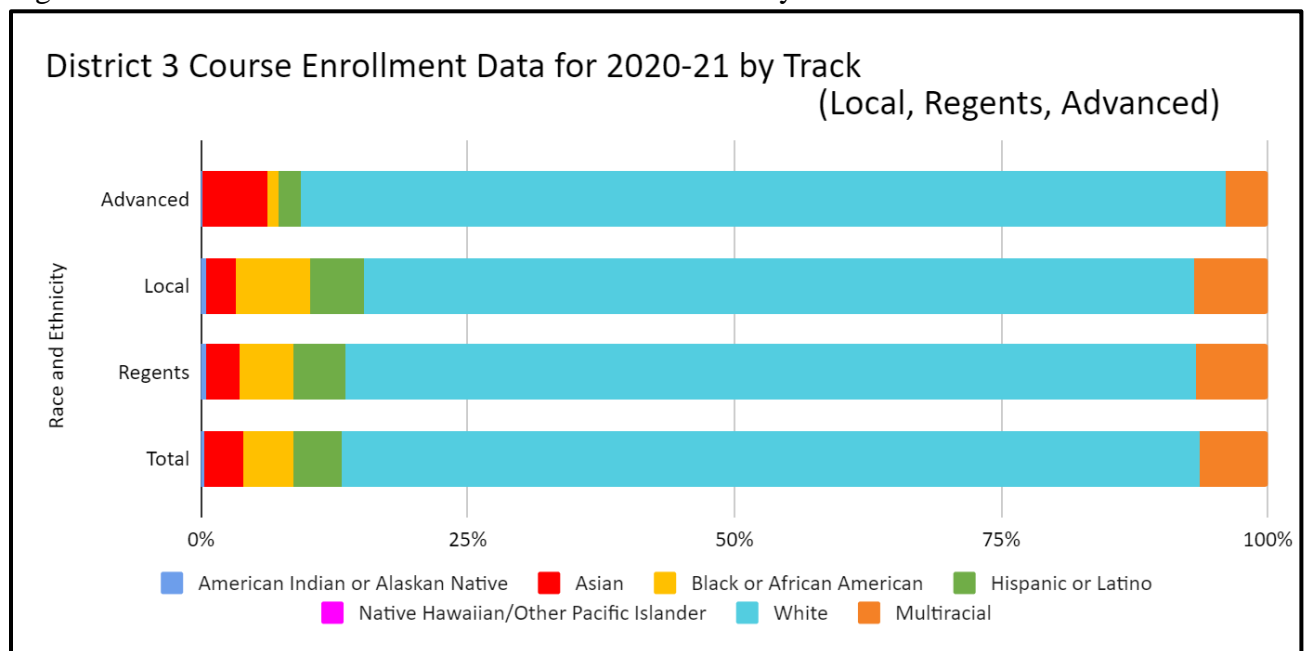


Table 4.6 District 3 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	3617	2334	28615	34566
American Indian or Alaskan Native	8	12	117	137
Asian	216	63	941	1220
Black or African American	42	162	1425	1629
Hispanic or Latino	75	119	1399	1593
Multiracial	146	160	1912	2218
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	3130	1818	22821	27769

Student enrollment in courses within District 4 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.7 and Table 4.7. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses when considering all or

total course placements/enrollments. As a result, black or African American students have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses followed by students Hispanic or Latino students and multiracial students.

Figure 4.7 District 4 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

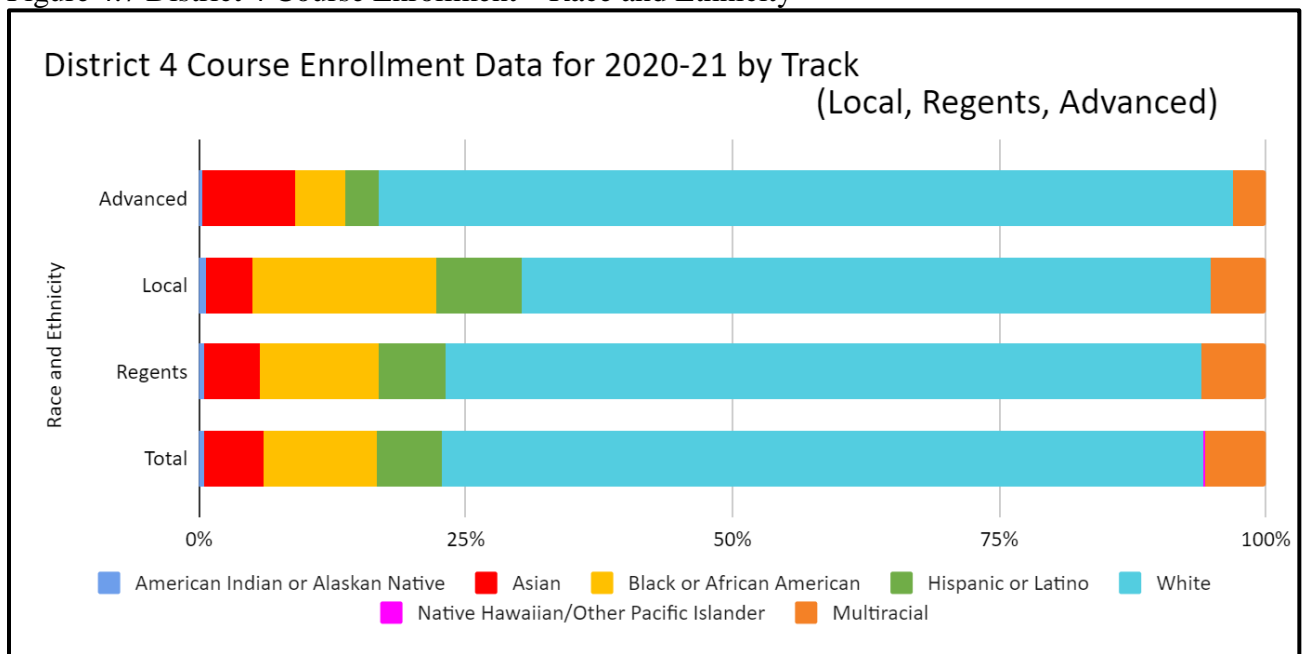


Table 4.7 District 4 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	2836	731	23669	27236
American Indian or Alaskan Native	10	5	114	129
Asian	247	32	1250	1529
Black or African American	132	126	2614	2872
Hispanic or Latino	91	58	1513	1662
Multiracial	88	38	1440	1566
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	9	9
White	2268	472	16729	19469

Student enrollment in courses within District 5 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.8 and Table 4.8. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. As a result, black or African American students have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses followed by students Hispanic or Latino students and multiracial students.

Figure 4.8 District 5 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

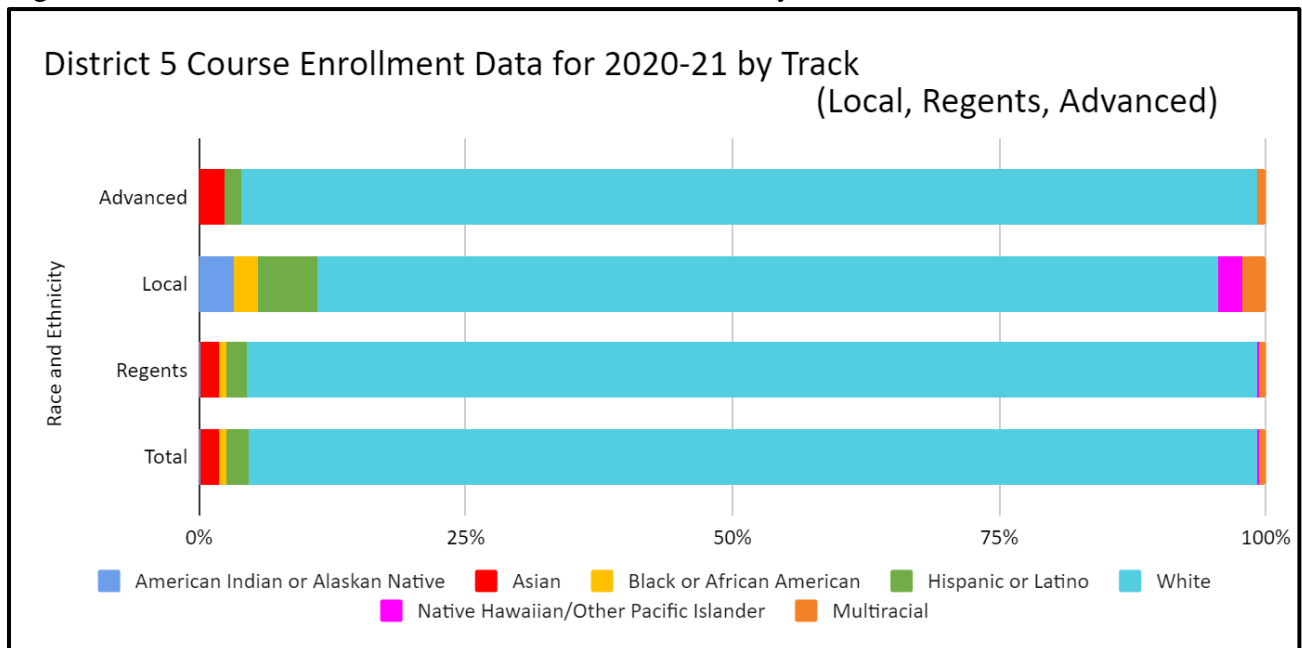




Table 4.8 District 5 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	804	90	5721	6615
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	3	10	13
Asian	19	0	93	112
Black or African American	1	2	42	45
Hispanic or Latino	12	5	116	133
Multiracial	7	2	39	48
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	2	7	9
White	765	76	5414	6255

Student enrollment in courses within District 6 is represented by race and ethnicity in Figure 4.9 and Table 4.9. The data also highlights a greater representation of Asian students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, white students are placed in “Advanced” courses at a higher percentage rate than in “Local” courses as are Hispanic or Latino students when considering all or total course placements/enrollments. As a result, black or African American students have a greater percentage of placement in “Local” courses as opposed to “Advanced” courses.

Figure 4.9 District 6 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

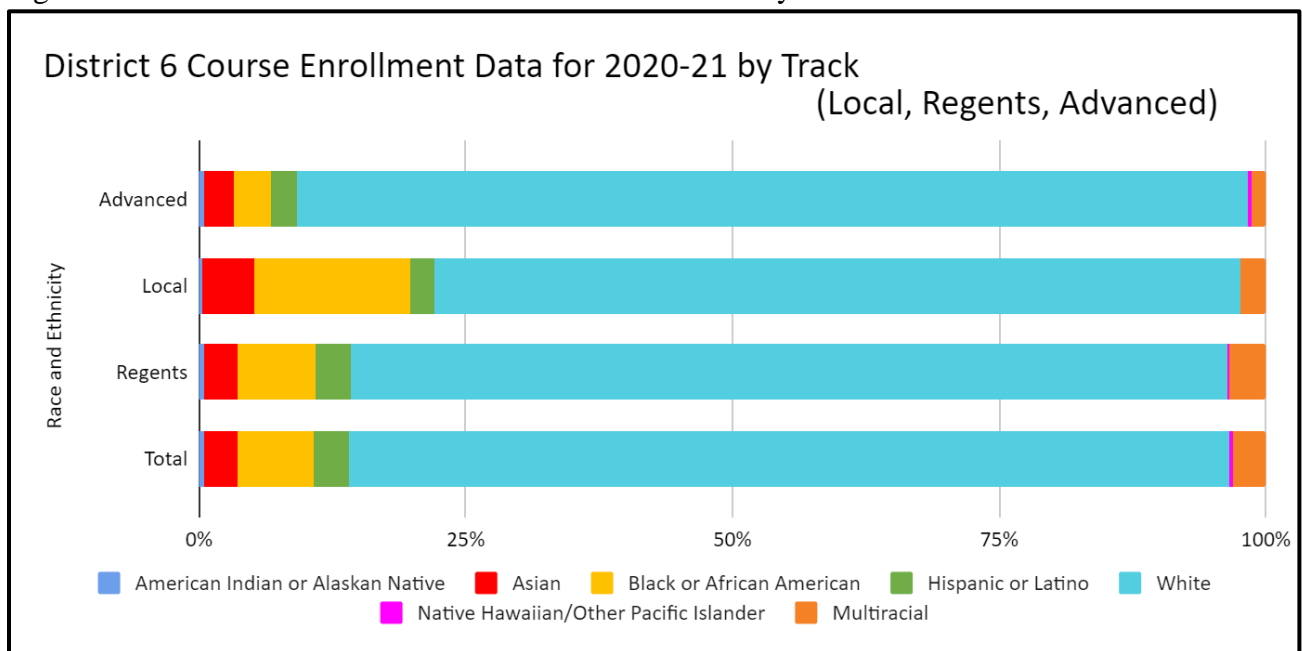


Table 4.9 District 6 Course Enrollment – Race and Ethnicity

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1493	567	10699	12759
American Indian or Alaskan Native	7	2	50	59
Asian	42	27	345	414
Black or African American	52	83	767	902
Hispanic or Latino	36	13	368	417
Multiracial	21	14	359	394
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3	0	33	36
White	1332	428	8777	10537

In summary, students identifying as Asian or white have more access to “Advanced” course placements based on their percentage of enrollment in that track, while students identifying as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander or black or African American have the least access to “Advanced” course placements. Correspondingly, students identifying as

American Indian or Alaskan Native or black or African American are placed more frequently in “Local” courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that specific track, while students identifying as Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander have the smallest percentage of enrollments in “Local” track courses. This data calls to light a glaring reality regarding equity in course placement and enrollments. As such, these schools most marginalized and oppressed race and ethnicity groups are more likely to be placed in “Local” track courses as opposed to “Advanced” track courses.

### ***Gender***

Student enrollment in courses within all districts is represented by gender in Figure 4.10 and Table 4.10. The data highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.10 All Districts Course Enrollment – Gender

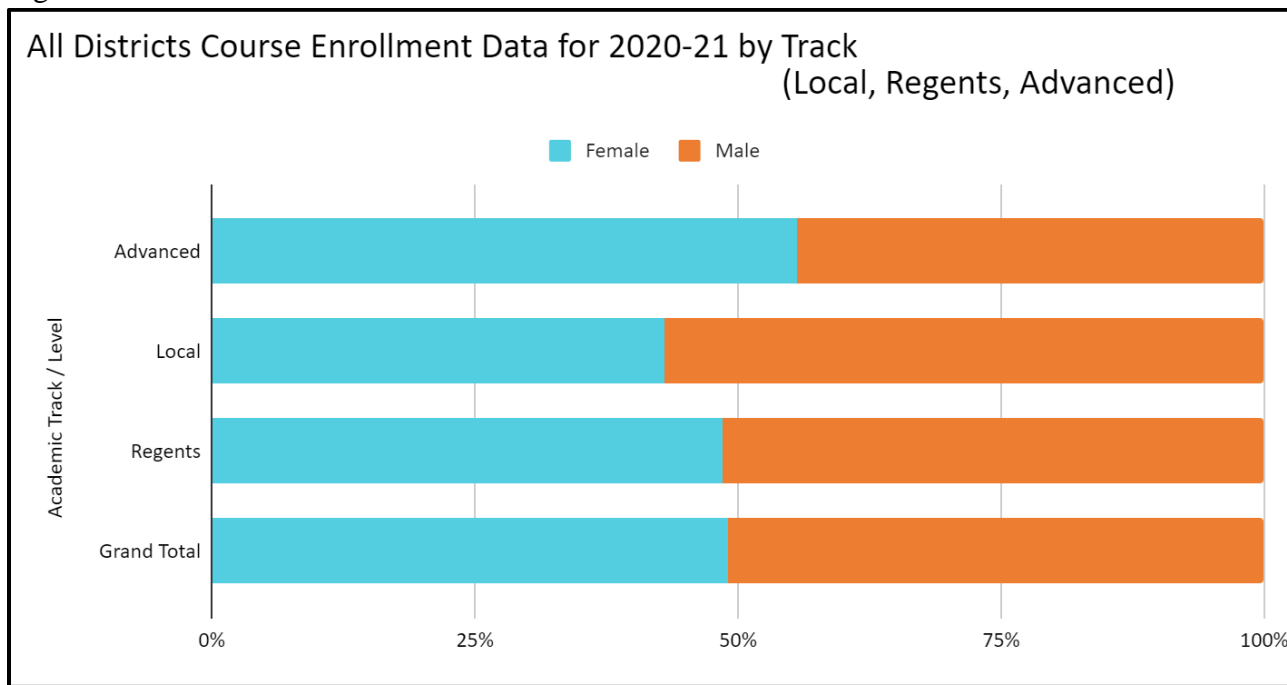


Table 4.10 All Districts Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	12115	5139	87372	104626
Female	6728	2212	42368	51308
Male	5387	2927	45004	53318

Student enrollment in courses within District 1 is represented by gender in Figure 4.11 and Table 4.11. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.11 District 1 Course Enrollment – Gender

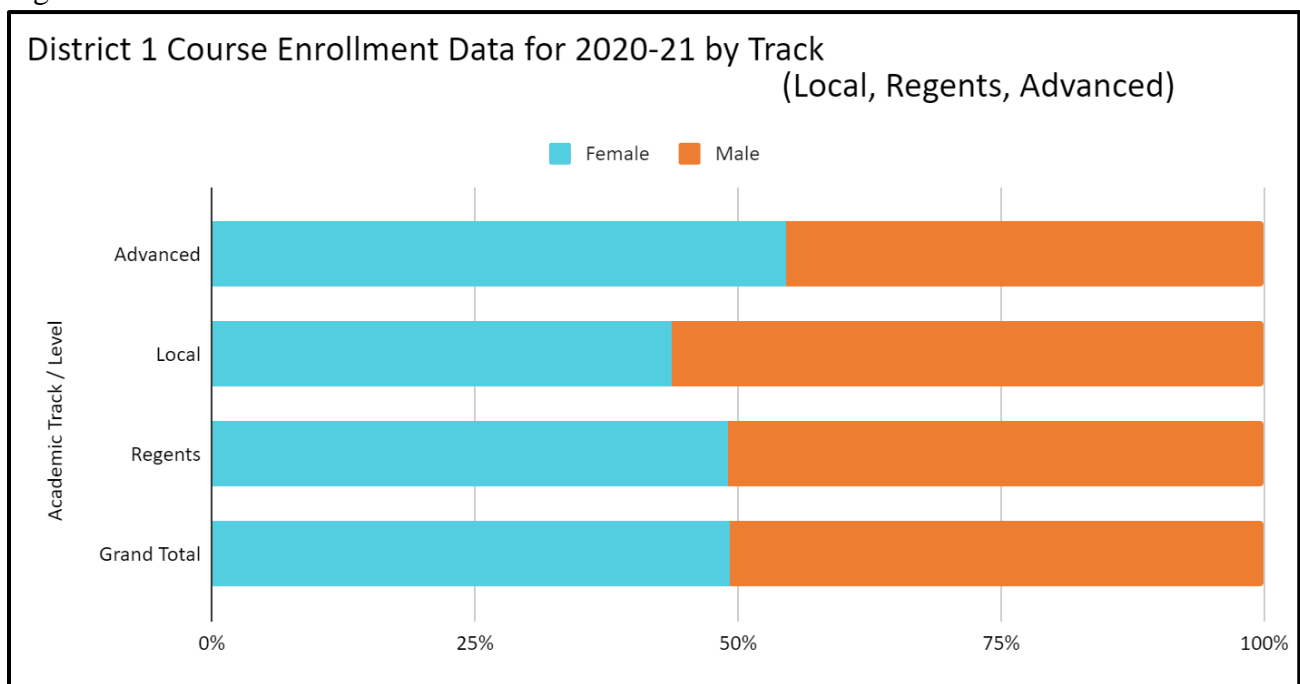


Table 4.11 District 1 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1491	1067	12101	14659
Female	814	467	5942	7223
Male	677	600	6159	7436

Student enrollment in courses within District 2 is represented by gender in Figure 4.12 and Table 4.12. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.12 District 2 Course Enrollment – Gender

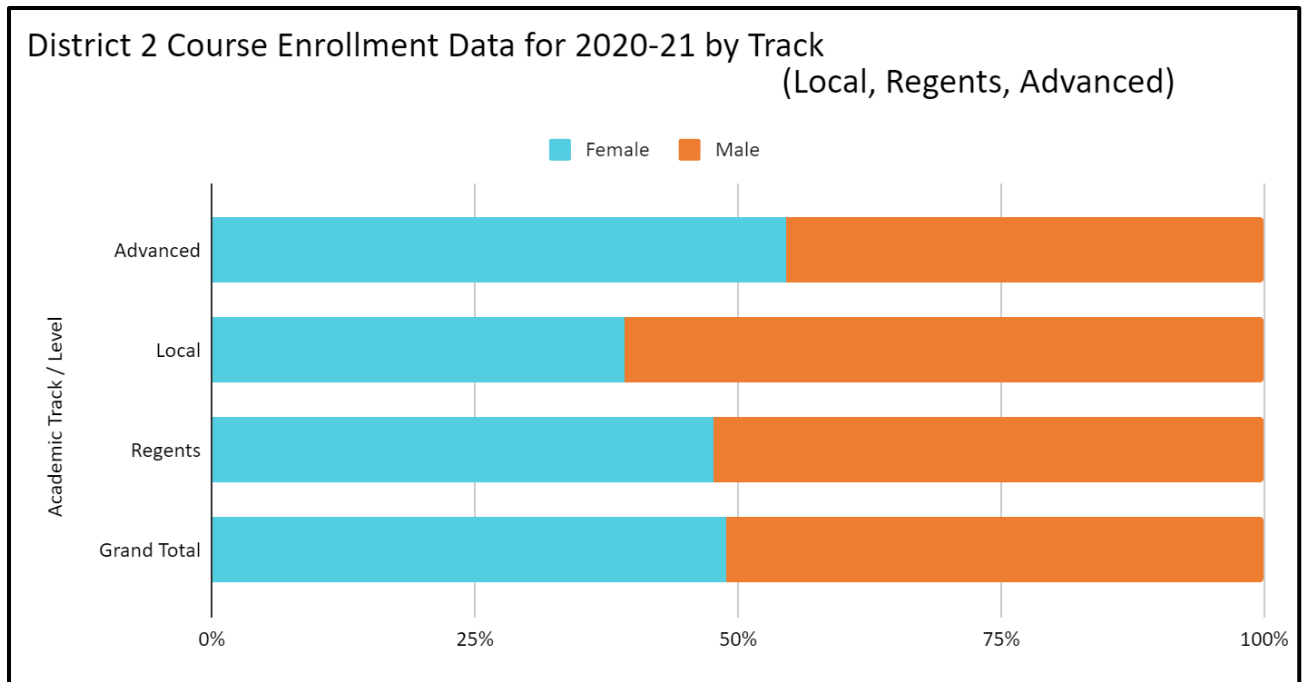


Table 4.12 District 2 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1874	350	6567	8791
Female	1023	137	3134	4294
Male	851	213	3433	4497

Student enrollment in courses within District 3 is represented by gender in Figure 4.13 and Table 4.13. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.13 District 3 Course Enrollment – Gender

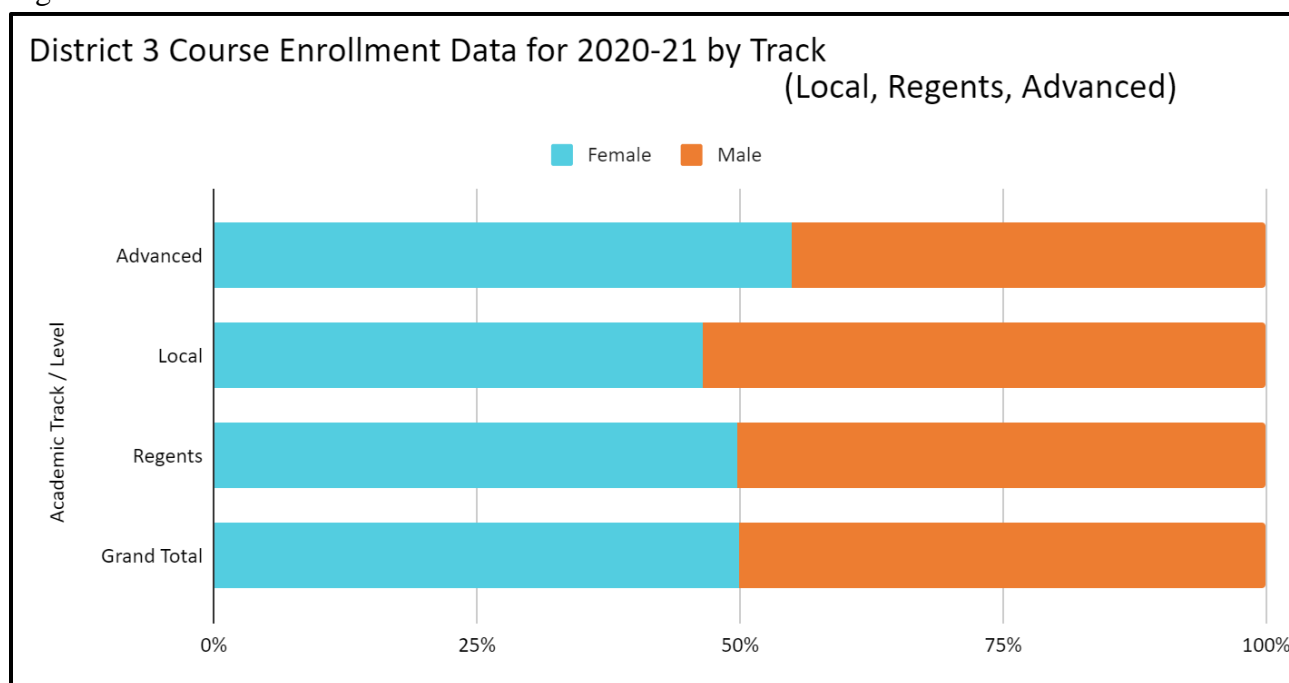


Table 4.13 District 3 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	3617	2334	28615	34566
Female	1985	1083	14212	17280
Male	1632	1251	14403	17286

Student enrollment in courses within District 4 is represented by gender in Figure 4.14 and Table 4.14. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.14 District 4 Course Enrollment – Gender

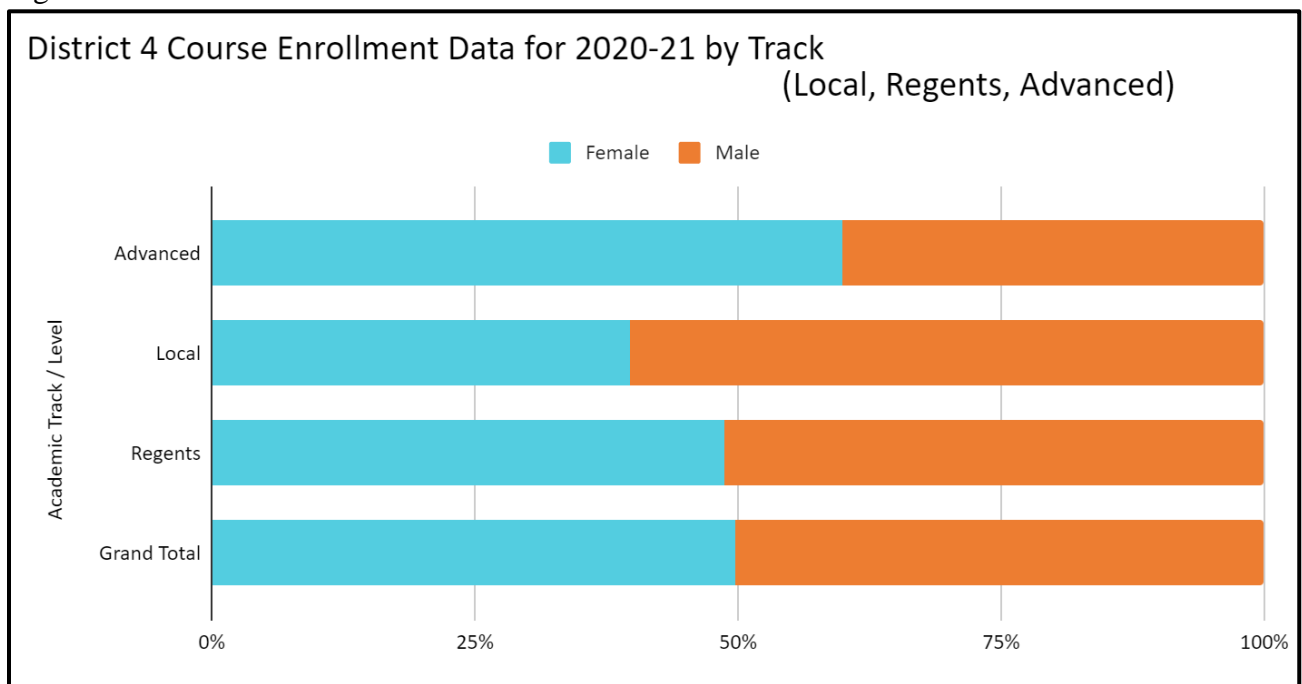


Table 4.14 District 4 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	2836	731	23669	27236
Female	1697	290	11546	13533
Male	1139	441	12123	13703

Student enrollment in courses within District 5 is represented by gender in Figure 4.15 and Table 4.15. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.15 District 5 Course Enrollment – Gender

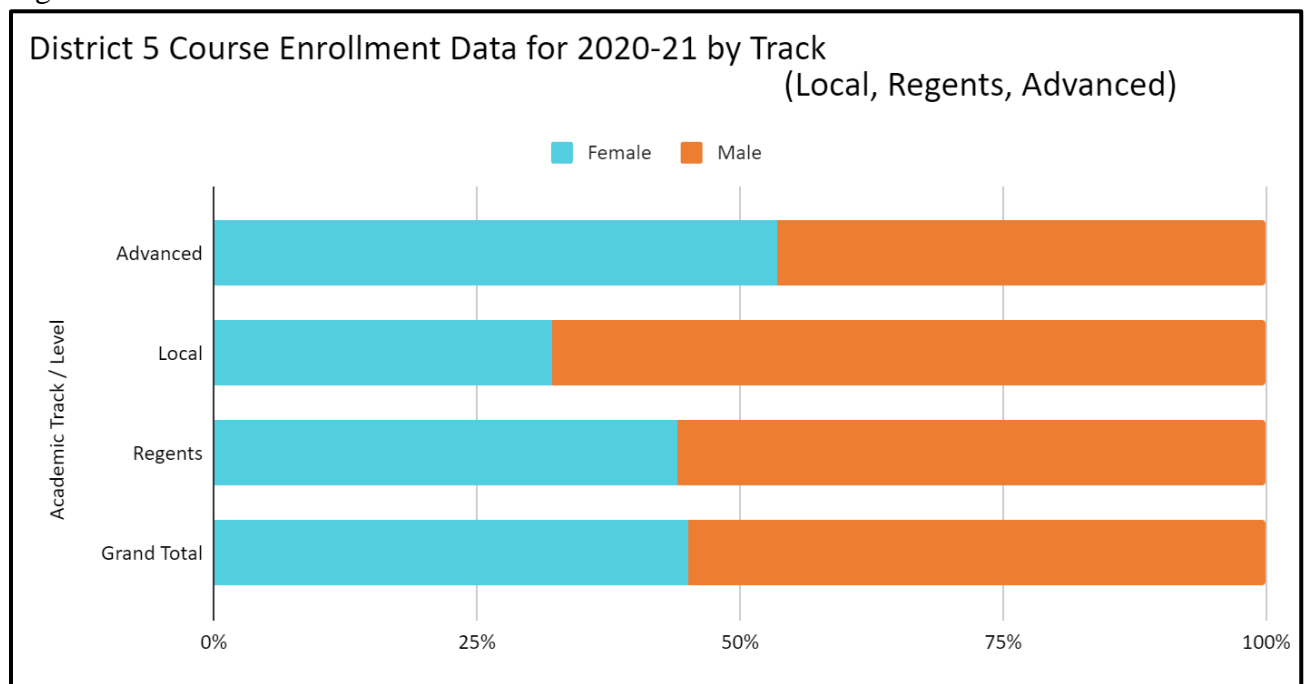


Table 4.15 District 5 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	804	90	5721	6615
Female	430	29	2521	2980
Male	374	61	3200	3635

Student enrollment in courses within District 6 is represented by gender in Figure 4.16 and Table 4.16. The data also highlights a greater representation of female students in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of male students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses.



Figure 4.16 District 6 Course Enrollment – Gender

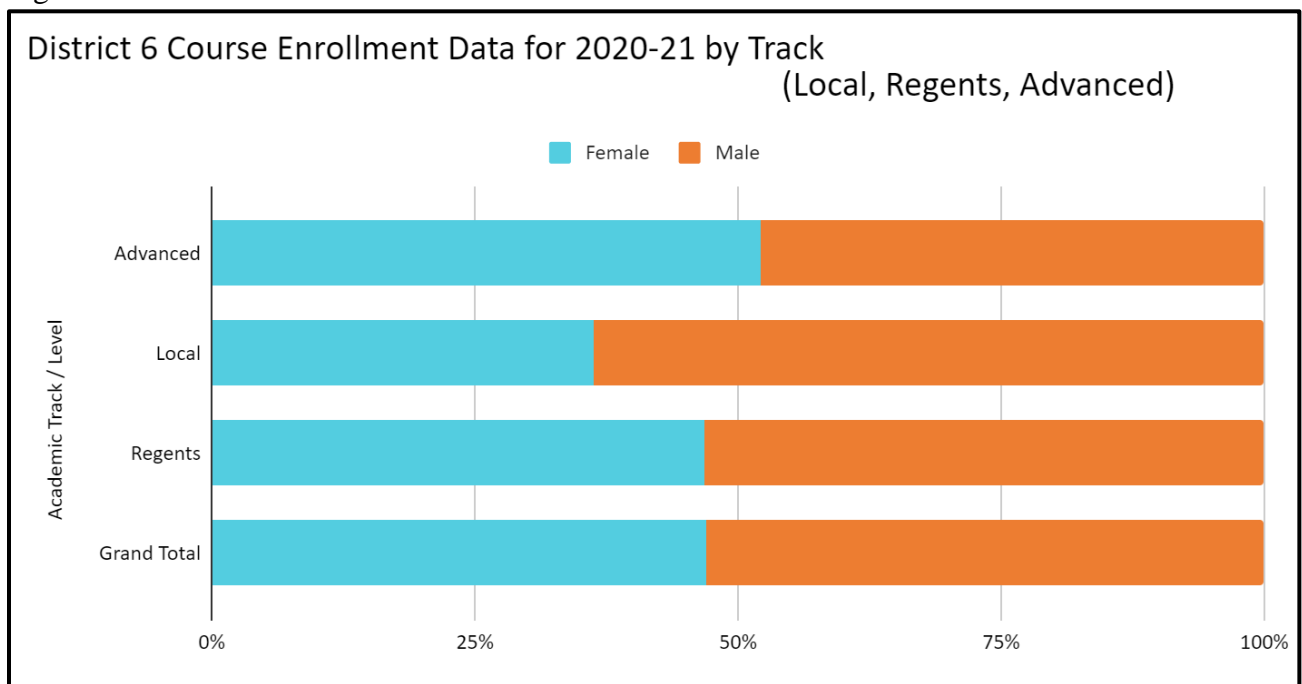


Table 4.16 District 6 Course Enrollment – Gender

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1493	567	10699	12759
Female	779	206	5013	5998
Male	714	361	5686	6761

In summary, students identifying as female rather than male have slightly more access to “Advanced” course placements based on their percentage of enrollment in that track when considering all district and individual districts. Correspondingly, students identifying as male as opposed to female are placed more frequently in “Local” courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that specific track.

### ***Labeled Disability / Ability***

Student enrollment in courses within all districts is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.17 and Table 4.17. The data unfortunately highlights a greater representation of

IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.17 All Districts Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

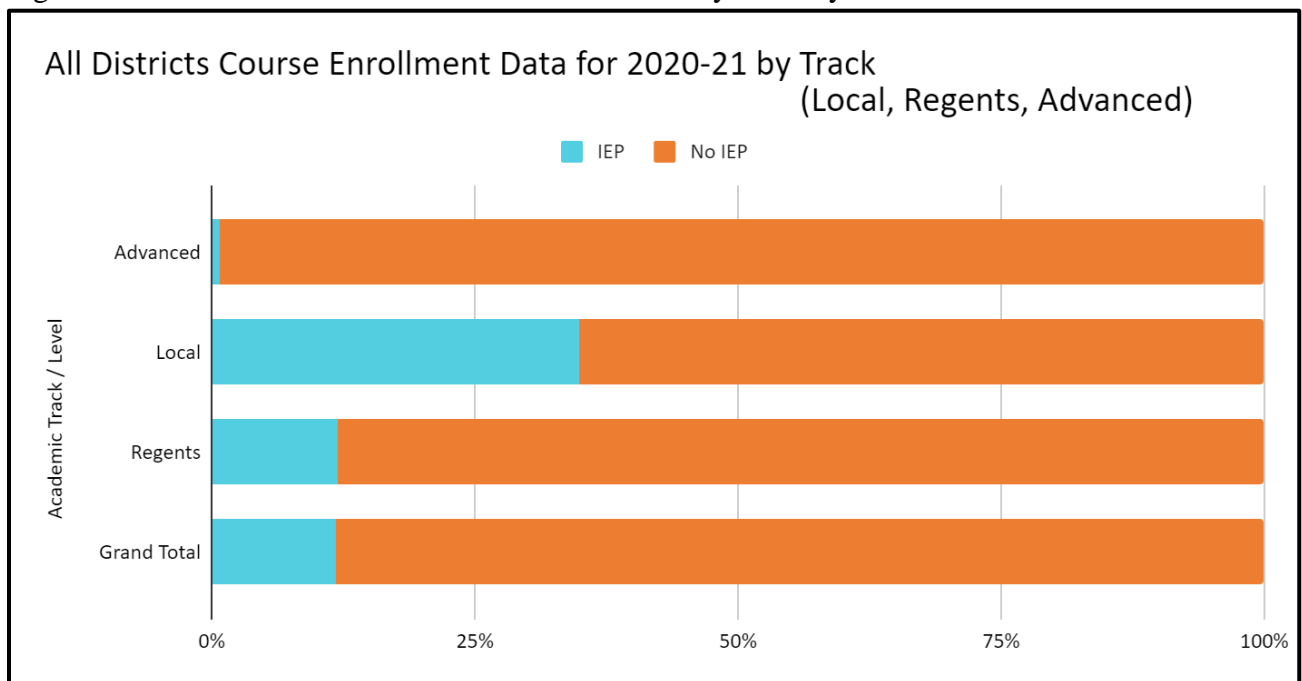


Table 4.17 All Districts Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	12115	5139	87372	104626
IEP (Individual Education Program)	95	1797	10527	12419
No IEP	12020	3342	76845	92207

Student enrollment in courses within District 1 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.18 and Table 4.18. The data also highlights a greater representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a

greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.18 District 1 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

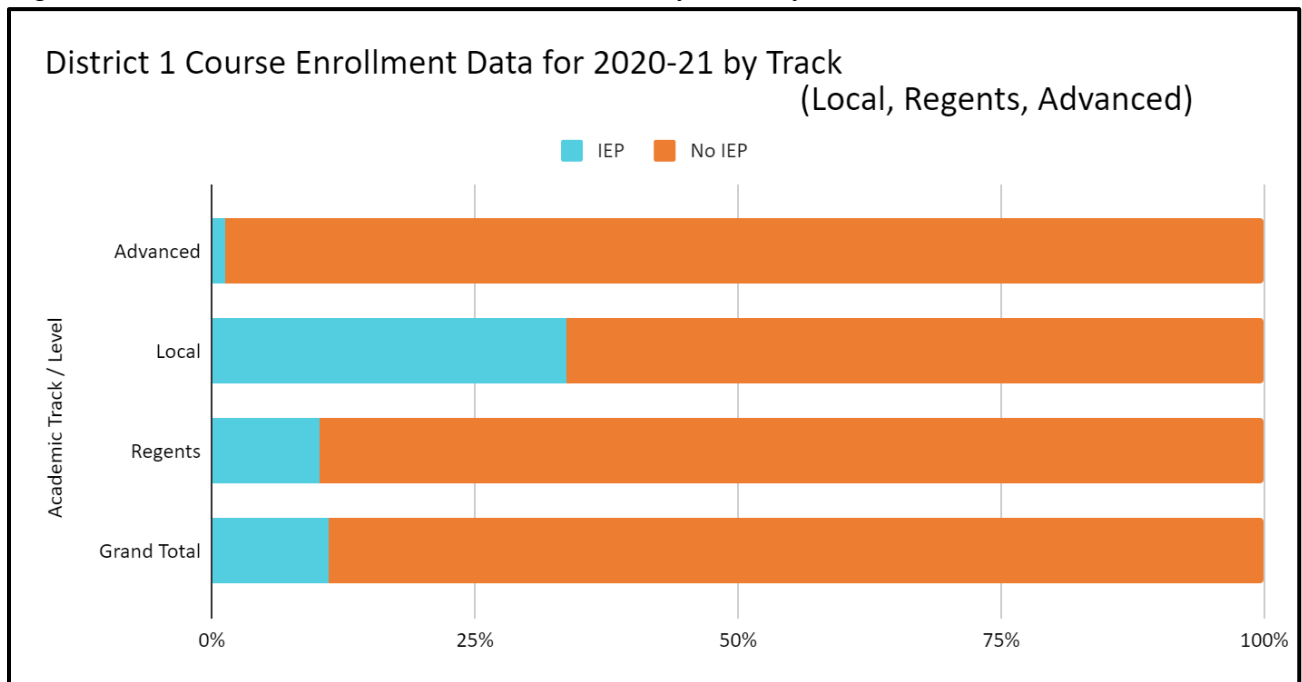


Table 4.18 District 1 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1491	1067	12101	14659
IEP (Individual Education Program)	18	360	1245	1623
No IEP	1473	707	10856	13036

Student enrollment in courses within District 2 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.19 and Table 4.19. The data also highlights a greater representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in “Advanced” courses than

“Local” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, very few IEP placements (6 total) are in “Advanced” courses.

Figure 4.19 District 2 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

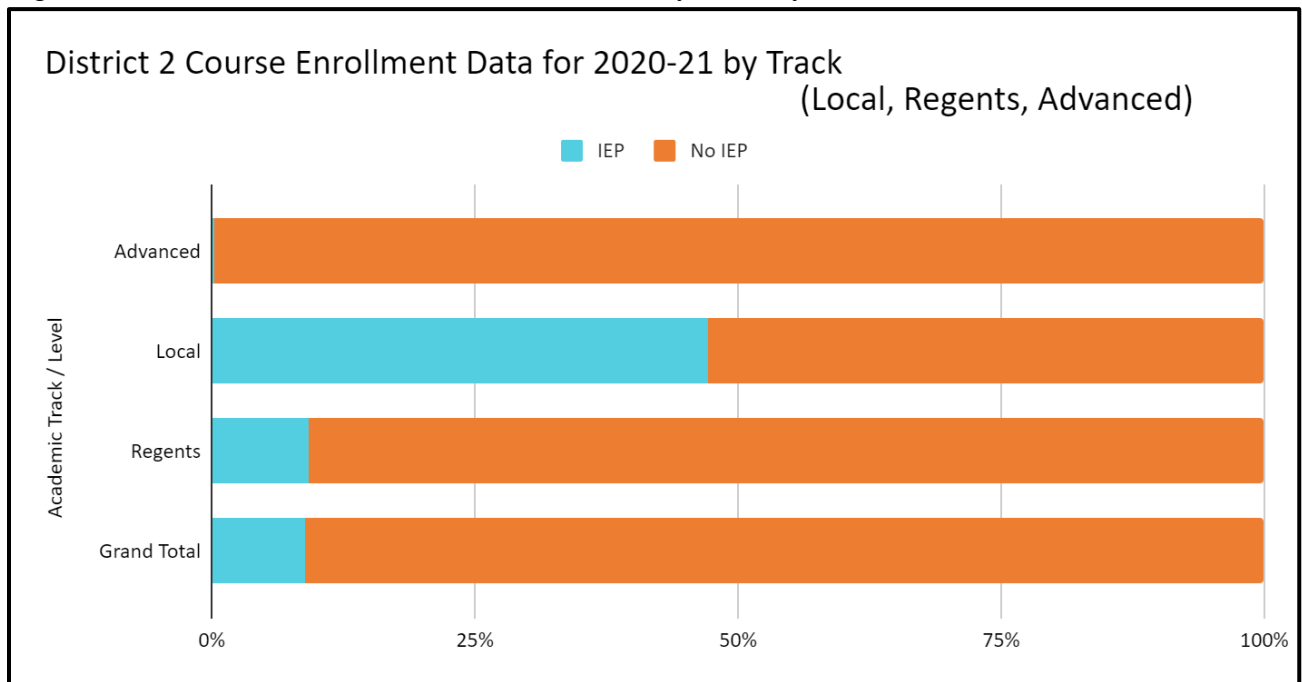


Table 4.19 District 2 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1874	350	6567	8791
IEP (Individual Education Program)	6	165	606	777
No IEP	1868	185	5961	8014

Student enrollment in courses within District 3 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.20 and Table 4.20. The data continues to highlight the trend of a greater representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in

“Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, very few IEP course placements (less than ½ of a percent) are in “Advanced” courses.

Figure 4.20 District 3 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

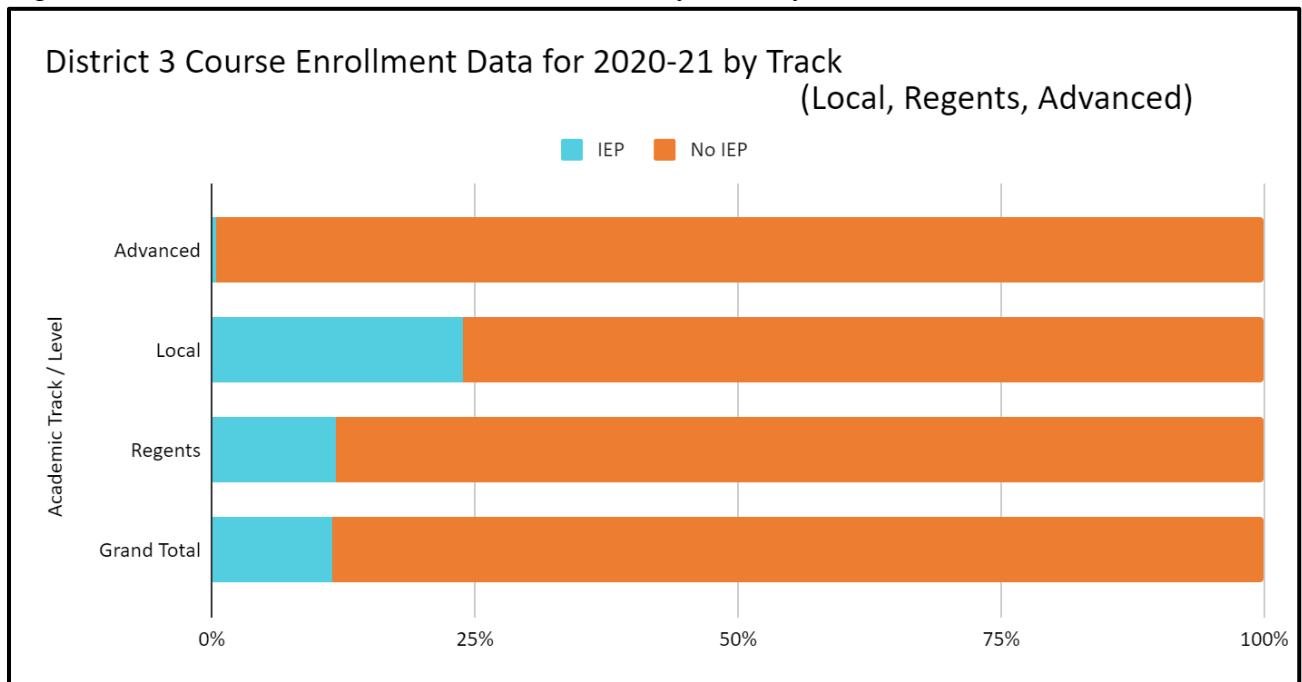


Table 4.20 District 3 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	3617	2334	28615	34566
IEP (Individual Education Program)	17	558	3392	3967
No IEP	3600	1776	25223	30599

Student enrollment in courses within District 4 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.21 and Table 4.21. The data remains consistent with the trend of a greater representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents”

courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.21 District 4 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

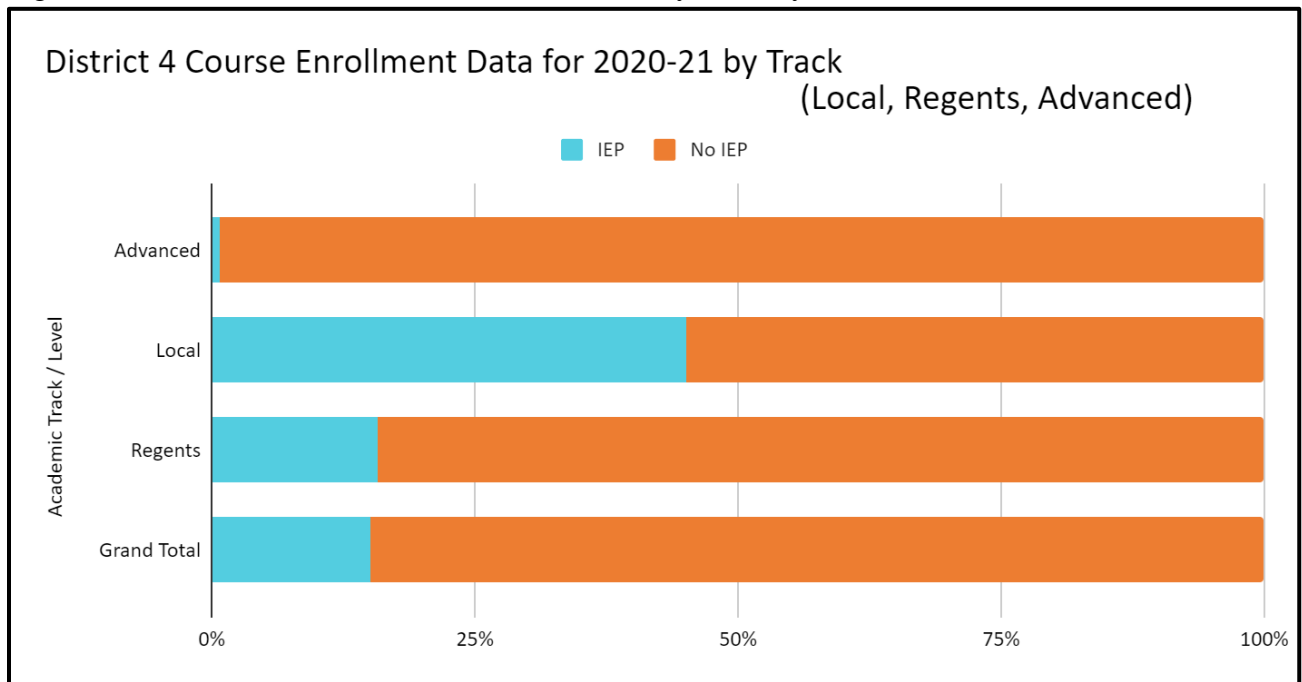


Table 4.21 District 4 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	2836	731	23669	27236
IEP (Individual Education Program)	22	330	3743	4095
No IEP	2814	401	19926	23141

Student enrollment in courses within District 5 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.22 and Table 4.22. The data displays representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses and “Regents” courses only. Not one course placement is made in “Advance” courses for students labeled as having an IEP. This disproportionality represents gross inequity

regarding access to advance level coursework for those students. On the other hand, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.22 District 5 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

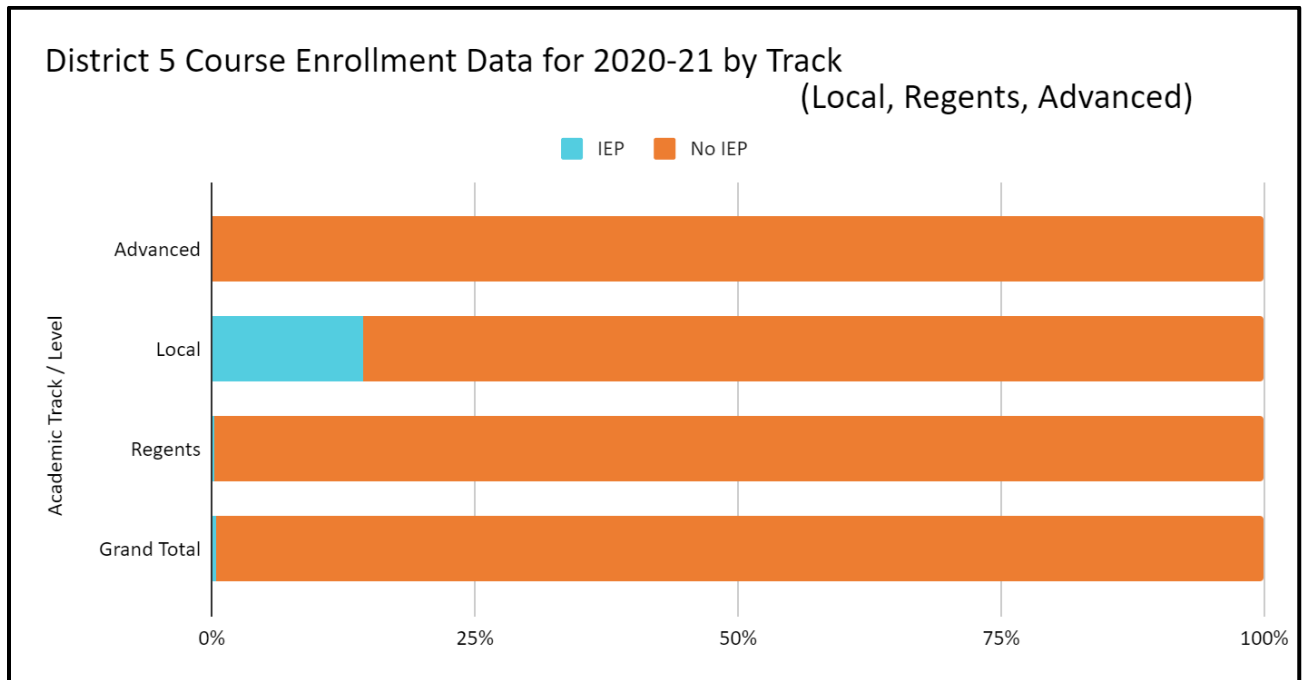


Table 4.22 District 5 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	804	90	5721	6615
IEP (Individual Education Program)	0	13	17	30
No IEP	804	77	5704	6585

Student enrollment in courses within District 6 is represented by disability and ability status in Figure 4.23 and Table 4.23. The data also showcases the trend of a greater representation of IEP labeled students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, in District 6, students labeled as having an IEP fill more than 65% of

“Local” course placements. On the contrary, a greater representation of students labeled as not having an IEP exists in “Advanced” courses as opposed to “Local” and “Regents” courses for District 6.

Figure 4.23 District 6 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

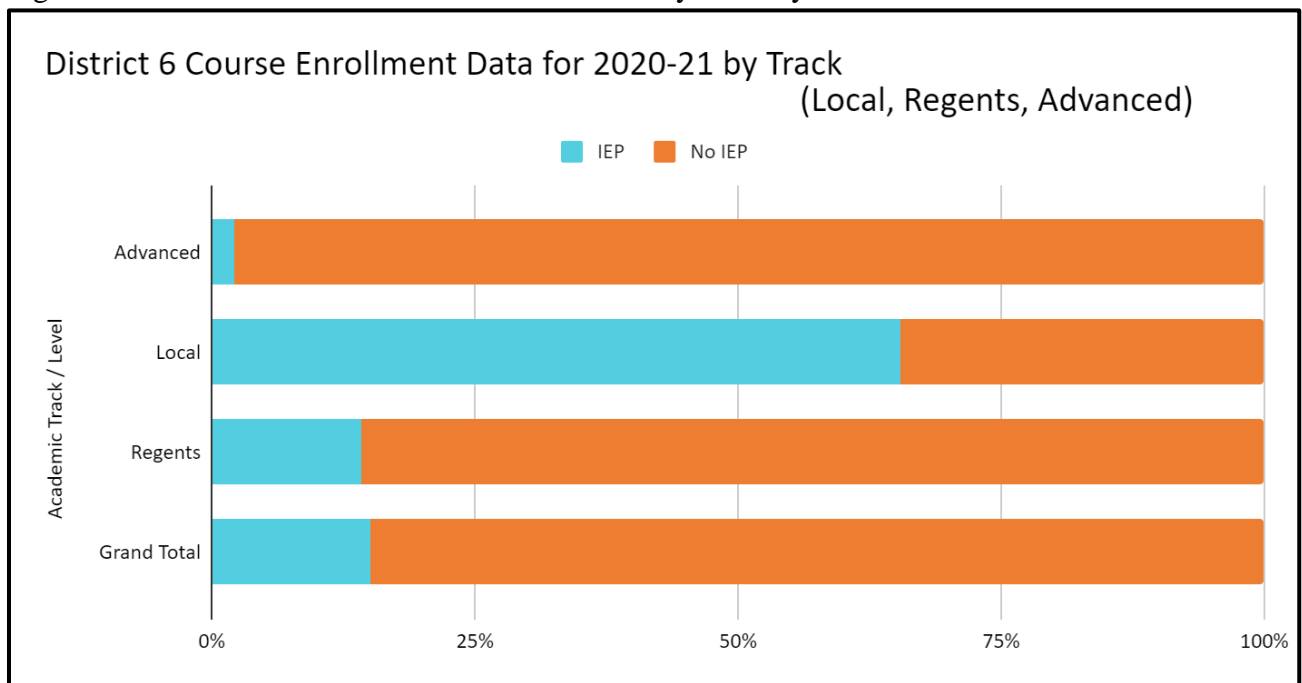


Table 4.23 District 6 Course Enrollment – Disability / Ability Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1493	567	10699	12759
IEP (Individual Education Program)	32	371	1524	1927
No IEP	1461	196	10832	12489

In summary, students labeled as not having an IEP rather than students who have an IEP have significantly more access to “Advanced” course placements based on their percentage of enrollment in that track. Moreover, the data highlights the fact that students labeled as having an IEP essentially have no access or very limited access to “Advanced” track course offerings.

Congruently, students labeled as having a learning disability as opposed to all other students are



placed more frequently in “Local” courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that specific track. This data also calls to light a glaring reality regarding equity in course placement and enrollments for students labeled as having a learning disability. As such, schools and district leaders must think more critically about how they support and challenge all students.

### ***Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL)***

Student enrollment in courses within all districts is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.24 and Table 4.24. The data regrettably displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.24 All Districts Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

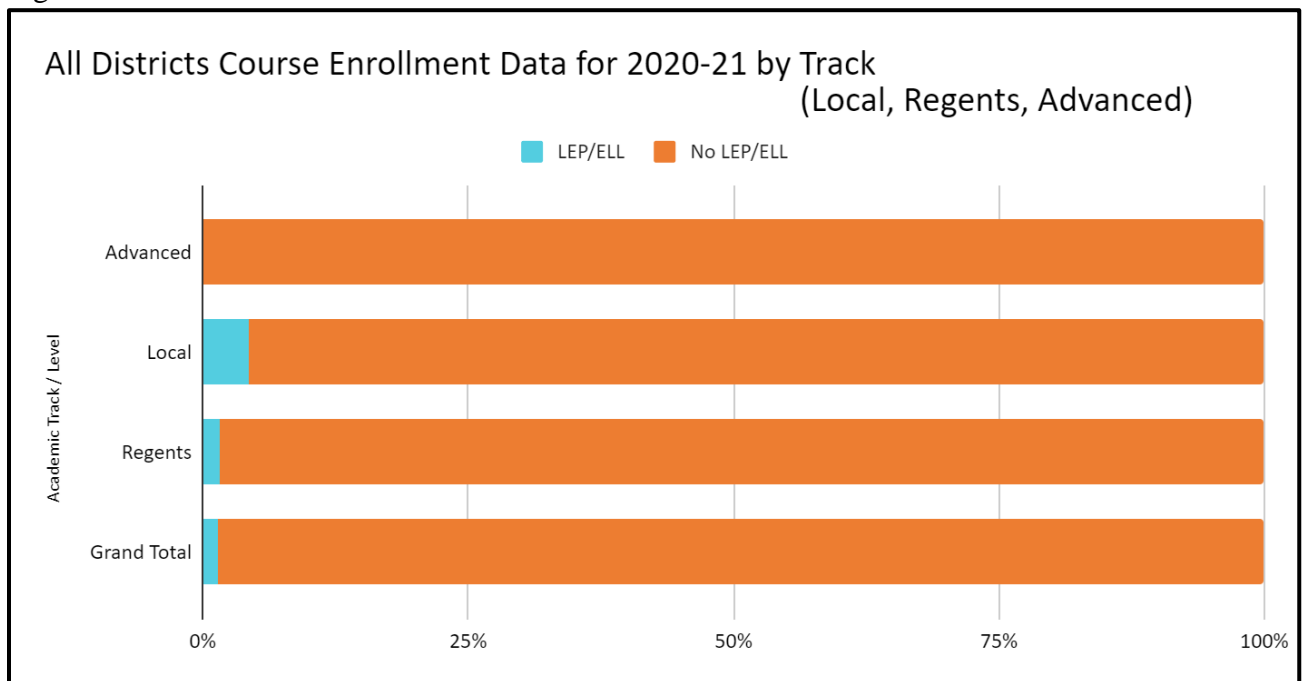


Table 4.24 All Districts Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	12115	5139	87372	104626
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	13	221	1330	1564
No LEP/ELL	12102	4918	86042	103062

Student enrollment in courses within District 1 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.25 and Table 4.25. The data displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses and conversely, a greater representation of students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, only 13 total LEP/ELL course placements out of 1564 are made to “Advanced” courses.

Figure 4.25 District 1 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

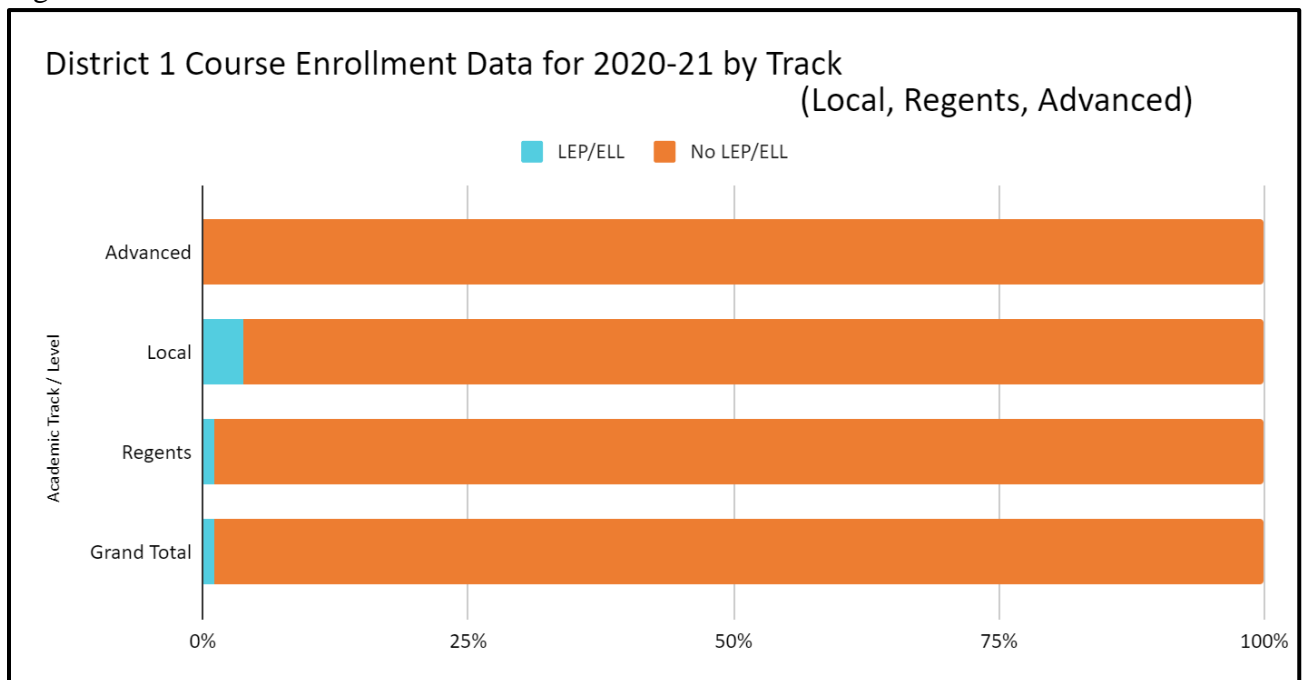


Table 4.25 District 1 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1491	1067	12101	14659
EP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	2	41	124	167
No LEP/ELL	1489	1026	11977	14492

Student enrollment in courses within District 2 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.26 and Table 4.26. The data, consistent with District 1, displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.26 District 2 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

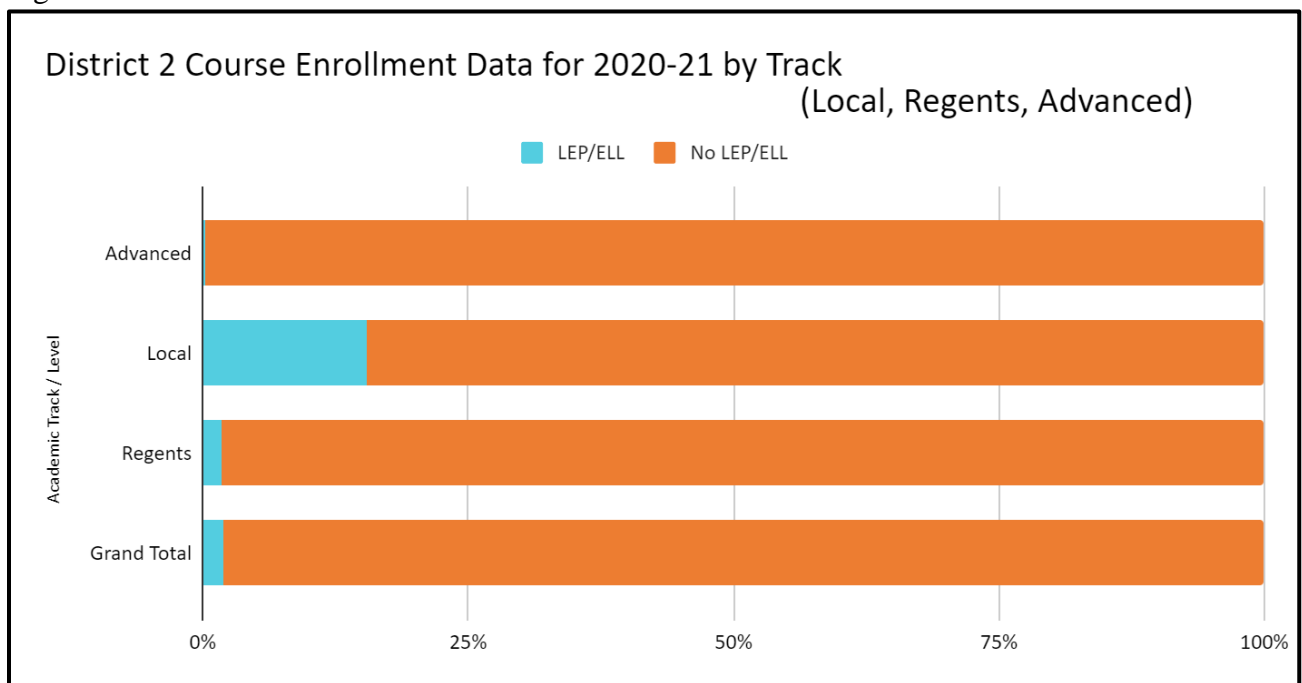


Table 4.26 District 2 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1874	350	6567	8791
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	5	54	115	174
No LEP/ELL	1869	296	6452	8617

Student enrollment in courses within District 3 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.27 and Table 4.27. The data, like District 1 and District 2, displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents”. Also, consistent, the data showcases students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, only 1 LEP/ELL course placement out of 470 was made to an “Advanced” course.

Figure 4.27 District 3 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

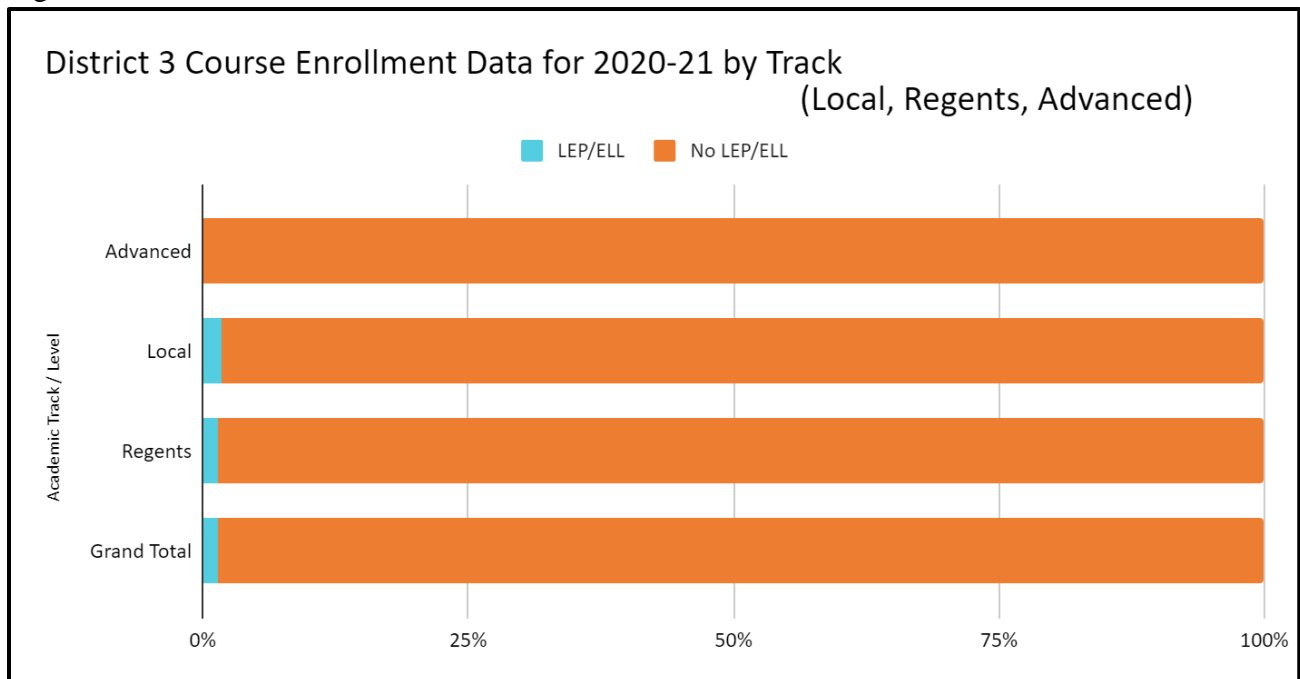


Table 4.27 District 3 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	3617	2334	28615	34566
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	1	42	427	470
No LEP/ELL	3616	2292	28188	34096

Student enrollment in courses within District 4 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.28 and Table 4.28. The data continues to show a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses. Similarly, a greater representation of students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses was made as opposed to “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.28 District 4 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

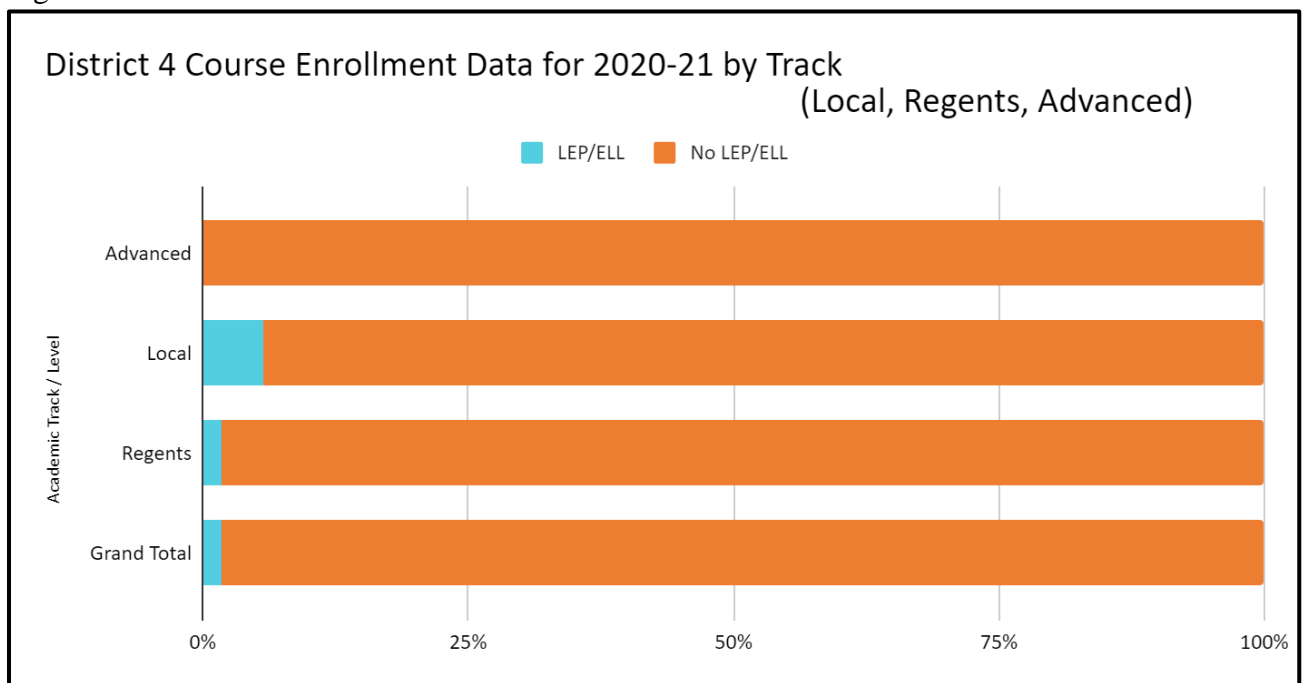


Table 4.28 District 4 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	2836	731	23669	27236
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	3	42	416	461
No LEP/ELL	2833	689	23253	26775

Student enrollment in courses within District 5 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.29 and Table 4.29. While District 5 has very few LEP/ELL status students the data consistently displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses rather than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses. Likewise for District 5, the data represents students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses as opposed to “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.29 District 5 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

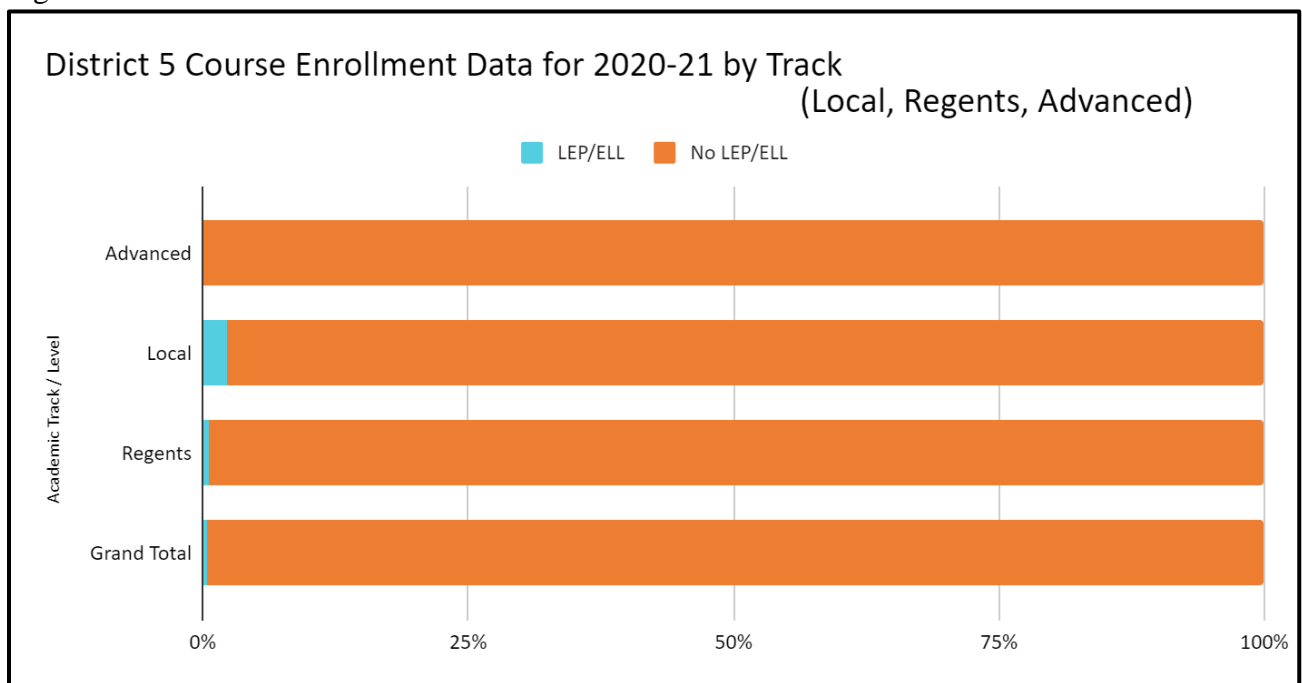


Table 4.29 District 5 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	804	90	5721	6615
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	1	2	29	32
No LEP/ELL	803	88	5692	6583

Student enrollment in courses within District 6 is represented by Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL) status in Figure 4.30 and Table 4.30. The data, like all other Districts (Districts 1 to 5), displays a greater representation of LEP/ELL status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents”. In addition, the data displays significantly more students labeled as not having LEP/ELL status in “Advanced” courses rather than “Local” and “Regents” courses. More specifically, only 1 LEP/ELL course placement out of 260 was made to an “Advanced” course.

Figure 4.30 District 6 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

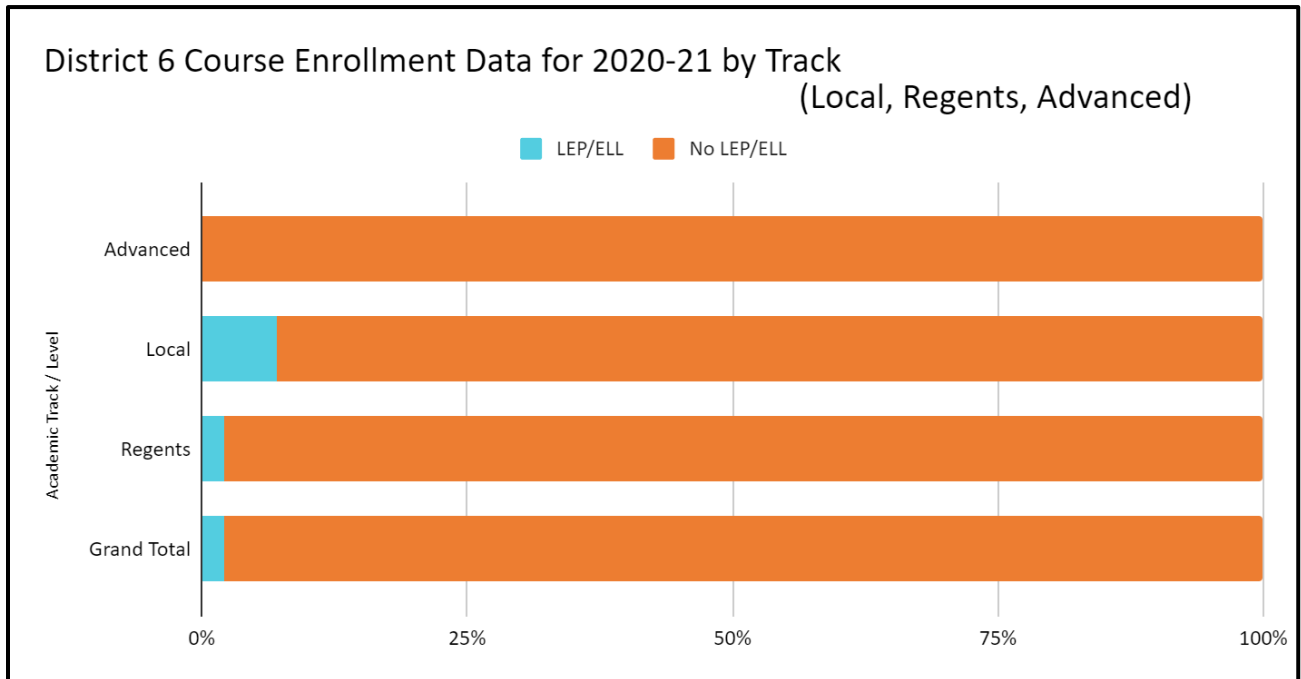


Table 4.30 District 6 Course Enrollment – LEP / ELL Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1493	567	10699	12759
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficiency/ English Language Learner)	1	40	219	260
No LEP/ELL	1492	527	10480	12499

In summary, students identifying as having a LEP/ELL status rather than those that do not have practically no access to “Advanced” course placements based on their percentage of enrollment in that track. Correspondingly, students identifying as LEP/ELL as opposed to all other students are placed more frequently in “Local” courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that specific track.

#### ***Section 504***

Student enrollment in courses within all districts is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.31 and Table 4.31. The data displays a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Local” and “Regents” courses than “Advanced” courses. Additionally, the data showcases students not having a Section 504 status in “Advanced” and “Regents” courses more so than “Local” courses.



Figure 4.31 All Districts Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

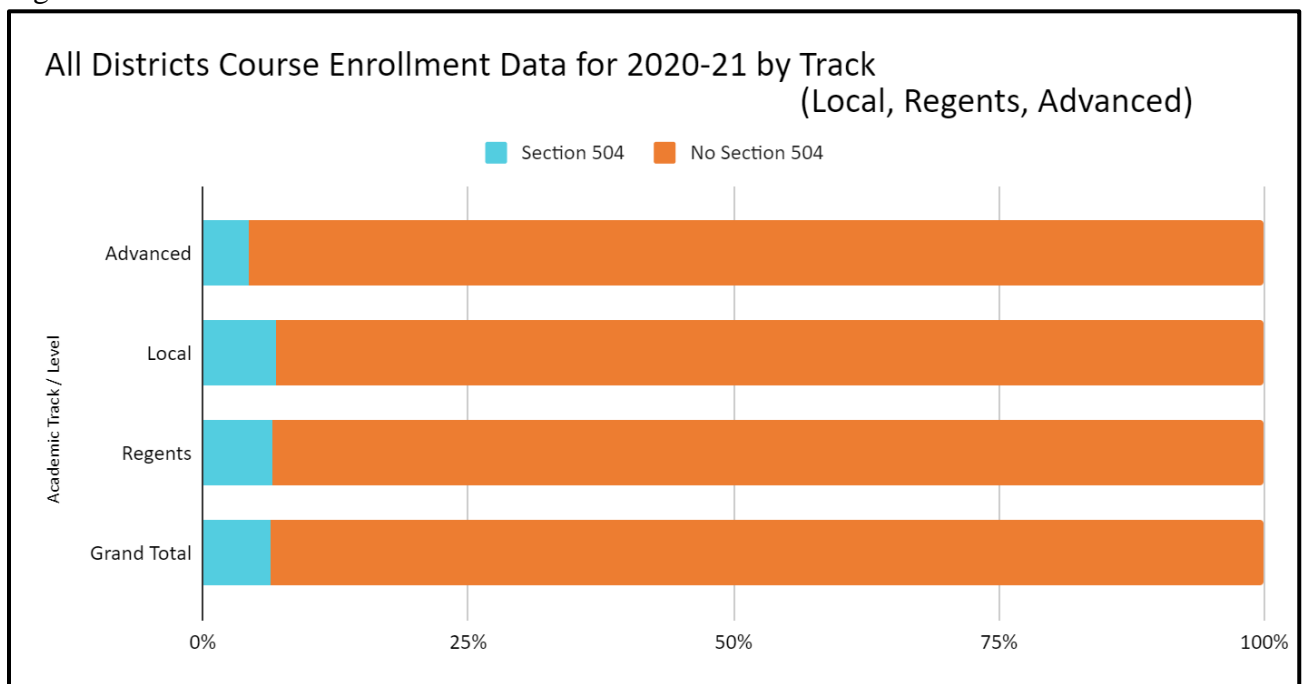


Table 4.31 All Districts Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	12115	5139	87372	104626
Section 504	527	351	5765	6643
No Section 504	11588	4788	81607	97983

Student enrollment in courses within District 1 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.32 and Table 4.32. The data highlights a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having Section 504 status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.32 District 1 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

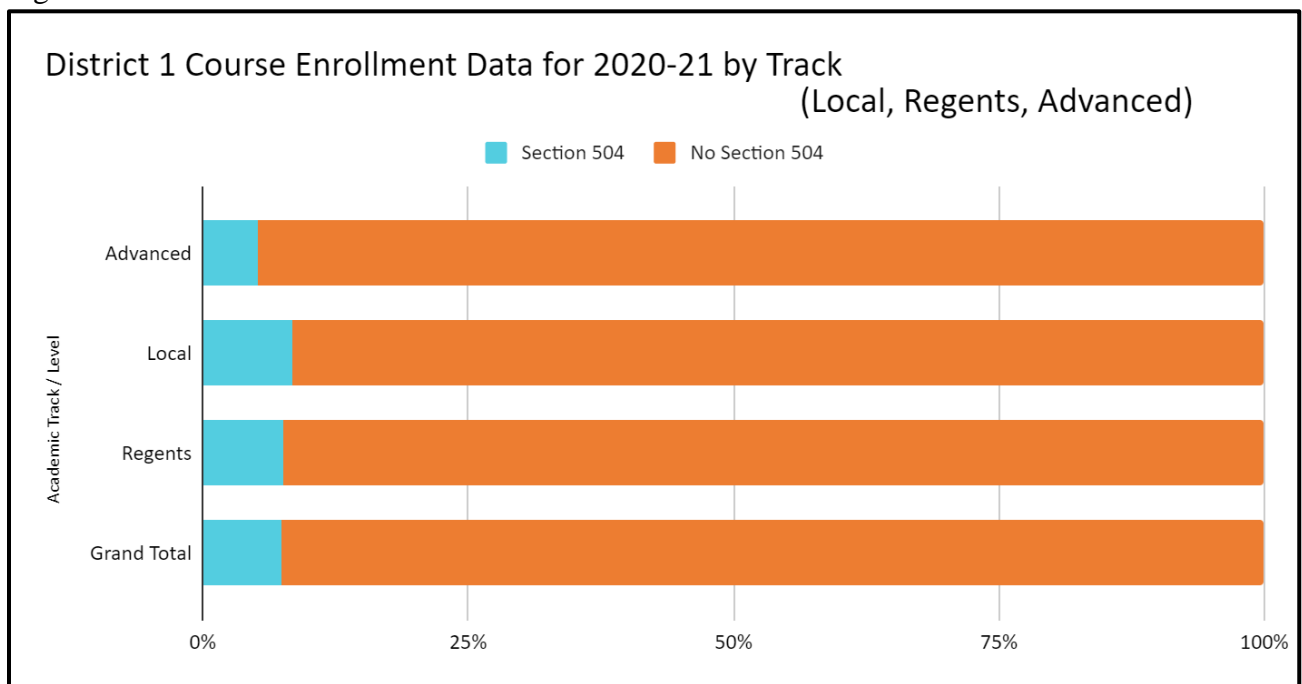


Table 4.32 District 1 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1491	1067	12101	14659
Section 504	78	91	910	1079
No Section 504	1413	976	11191	13580

Student enrollment in courses within District 2 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.33 and Table 4.33. The data highlights a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Regents” courses than “Advanced” and “Local” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having Section 504 status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.33 District 2 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

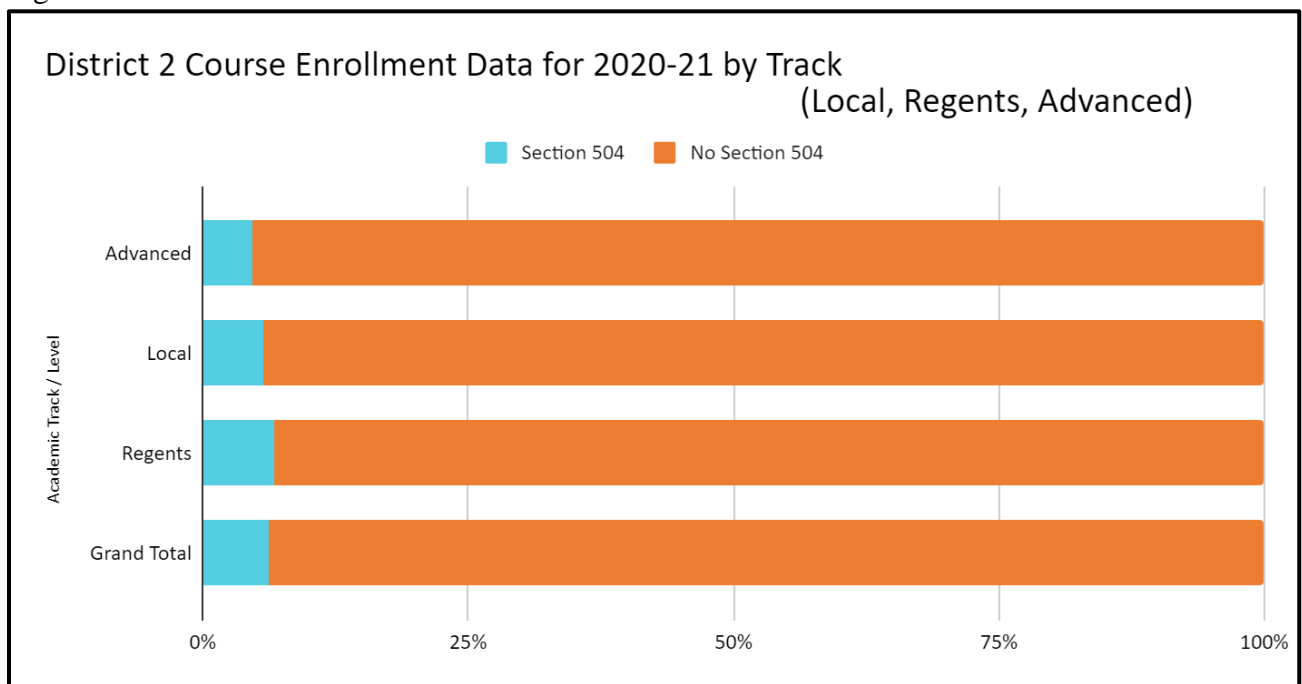


Table 4.33 District 2 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1874	350	6567	8791
Section 504	89	20	438	547
No Section 504	1785	330	6129	8244

Student enrollment in courses within District 3 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.34 and Table 4.34. The data highlights a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Local” courses than “Advanced” and “Regents” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having Section 504 status in “Advanced” and “Regents” courses than “Local” courses.

Figure 4.34 District 3 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

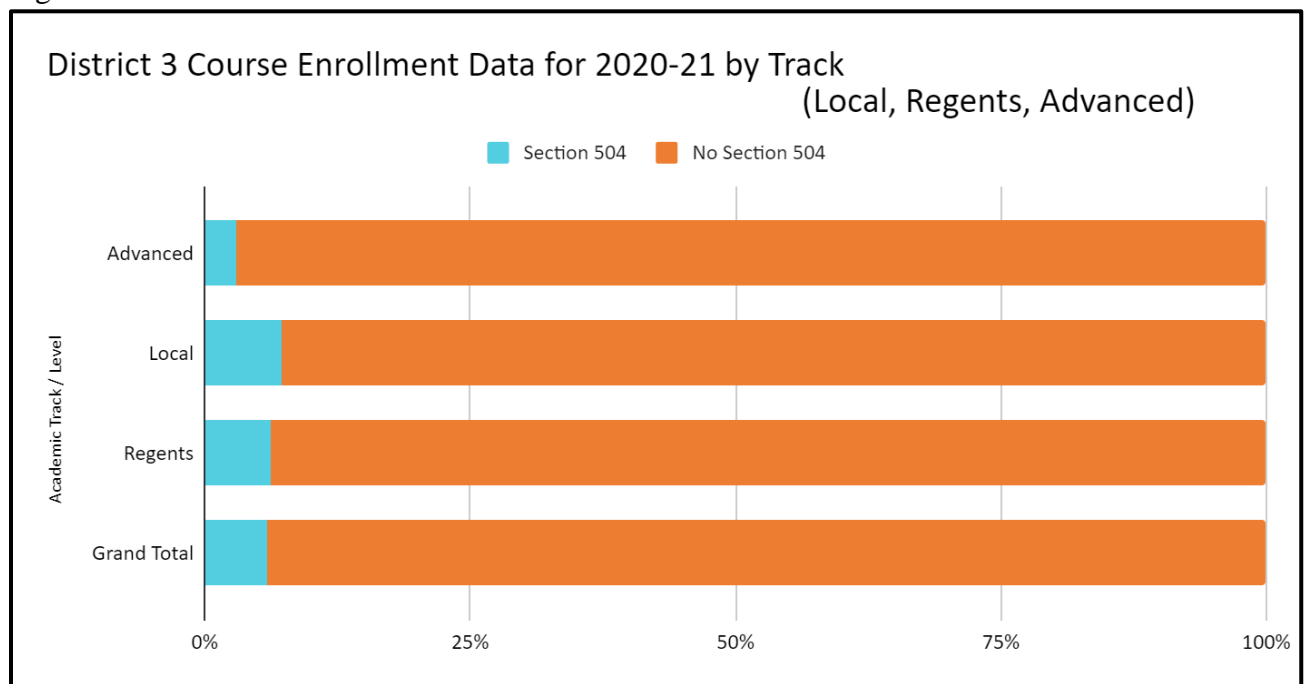


Table 4.34 District 3 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	3617	2334	28615	34566
Section 504	110	171	1765	2046
No Section 504	3507	2163	26850	32520

Student enrollment in courses within District 4 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.35 and Table 4.35. The data highlights a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Regents” and “Local” courses than “Advanced” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having Section 504 status in “Advanced” courses than “Local” and “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.35 District 4 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

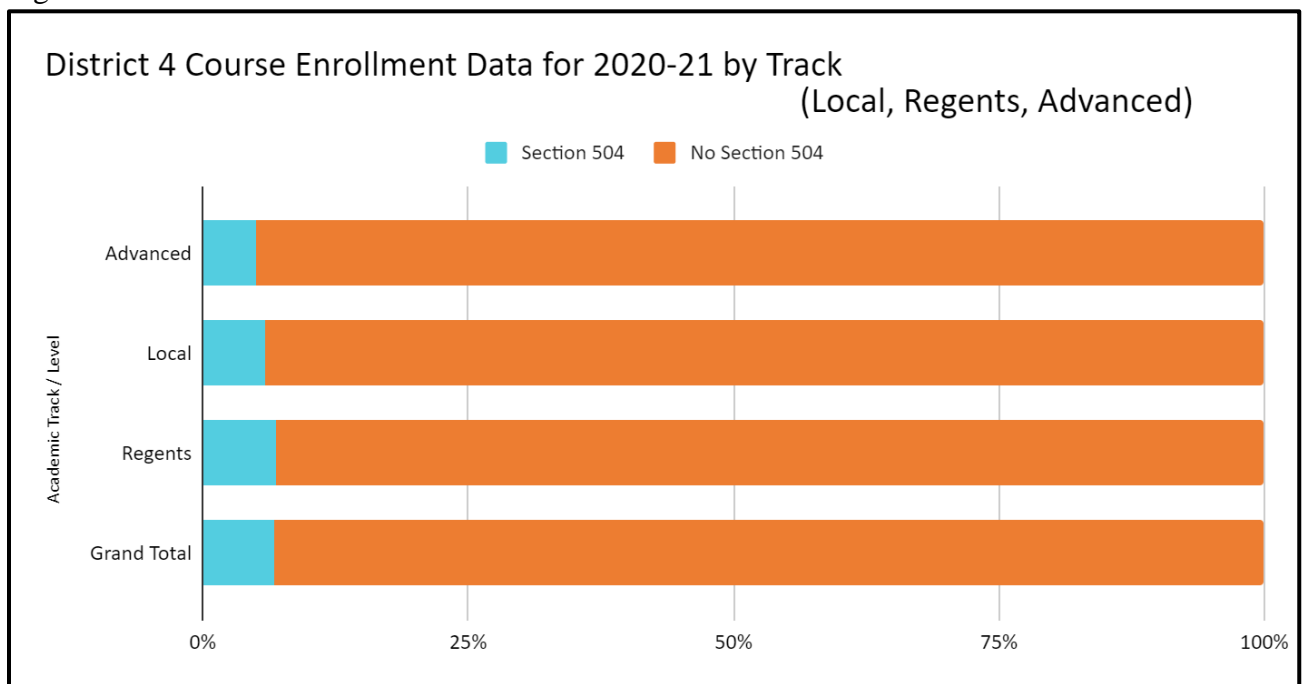


Table 4.35 District 4 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	2836	731	23669	27236
Section 504	143	43	1637	1823
No Section 504	2693	688	22032	25413

Student enrollment in courses within District 5 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.36 and Table 4.36. Interestingly, the data highlights District 5 has no students with Section 504 status identified. While this data appears to be an outlier when compared to the other districts, it raises the question whether students who could be labeled as Section 504 go unnoticed or are labeled as receiving more services and accommodations as a student labeled with and IEP.

Figure 4.36 District 5 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

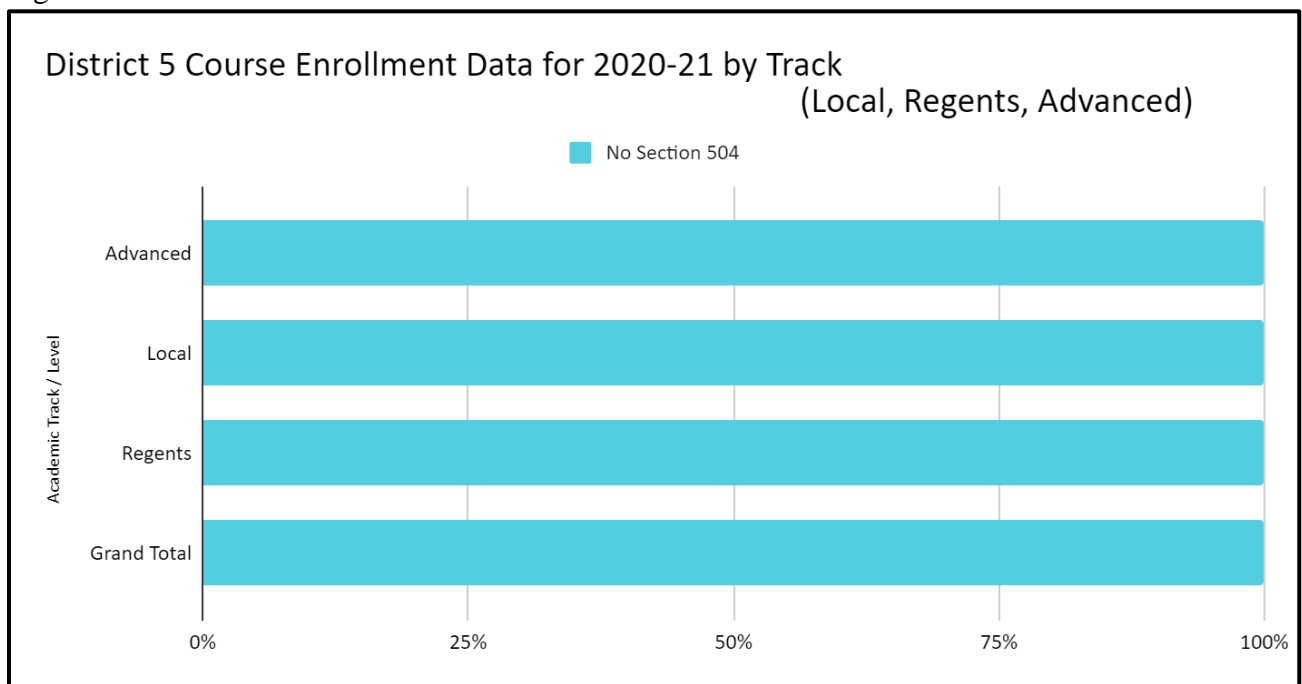


Table 4.36 District 5 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	804	90	5721	6615
Section 504	0	0	0	0
No Section 504	804	90	5721	6615

Student enrollment in courses within District 6 is represented by Section 504 status in Figure 4.37 and Table 4.37. The data highlights a greater representation of Section 504 status students in “Regents” courses than “Advanced” and “Local” courses, while a greater representation of students labeled as not having Section 504 status in “Advanced” and “Local” courses than “Regents” courses.

Figure 4.37 District 6 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

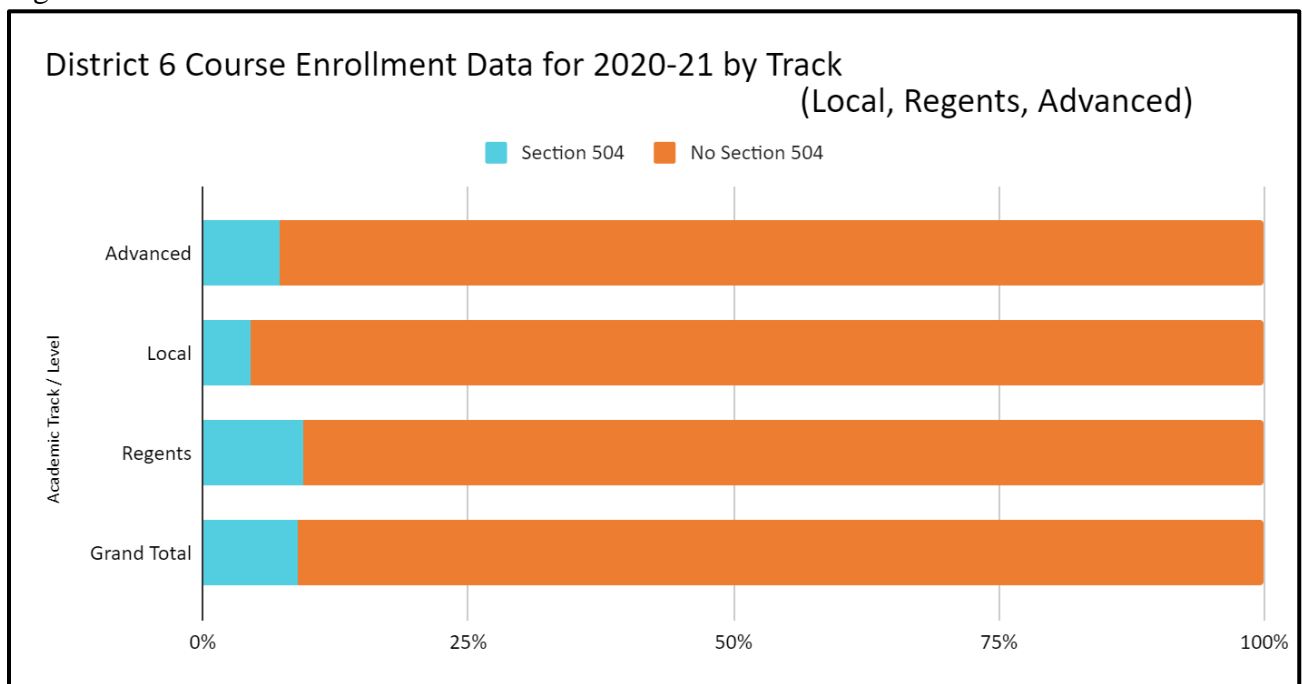


Table 4.37 District 6 Course Enrollment – Section 504 Status

	Advanced	Local	Regents	Total
Total # of Student Course Placements	1493	567	10699	12759
Section 504	107	26	1015	1148
No Section 504	1386	541	9684	11611

In summary, while the data represented in this section (Figures 4.31 - 4.37 and Tables 4.31 - 4.37) should highlight paralleled results for both groupings of students, those with Section 504 status and those without, because the purpose of students receiving Section 504 accommodations and modifications is to ensure equal access to an appropriate education through the providing of supports for said students, it doesn't in all districts and cases. The data represents some inequity regarding access to the three course offering tracks within the study's middle and high schools.

## **Advanced Placement (AP®) and Dual Enrollment**

Data secured from the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights through their yearly collection of key education and civil rights issues in public schools is represented in Figures 4.38 to 4.65 and Tables 4.38 to 4.65. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) data represents the most current information available as published by the United States Department of Education for the schools associated with this study's district leaders. The most current data collection period available to the public, which is represented in the figures and tables is 2017. As previously defined, Advanced Placement (AP®) refers to a program offering where students access college-level courses and curriculums and take a culminating examination for college credit. Dual Enrollment refers to students taking college-level courses while in high school concurrently with high school level programming. Unlike AP®, students concurrently enroll in a post-secondary institution of higher learning when they take Dual Enrollment courses.

The data in this section provides a telling story as to which groups of students have access to accelerated and advanced-level coursework. This information coupled with the enrollment data provided in the previous section call attention to the need for change as leaders address course tracking and the acceleration of students. This section of the findings chapter has been designated by the following subsections: Race and Ethnicity, Gender, Labeled Disability / Ability, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL).

### ***Race and Ethnicity***

Key highlights from the CRDC Data Survey for all districts in Figure 4.38 and Table 4.38 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (3.5% of the overall district populations) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 7.6% of the enrollment of students. Additionally, the same overrepresentation in AP® Math and Science courses with 9.5% of the



total enrollments. For Dual Enrollment courses, Asian student's make-up 3.8% of all Dual Enrollments.

Similar to Asian students, white identifying students (83.8% of the overall district populations) are overrepresented in AP® with 87.1% of the total enrollments. Similarly, white students maintain roughly the same disproportionality in AP® Math and Science at 86.4% and in Dual Enrollment courses with 87.8%.

The data also suggest that Black or African American students (6.1% of the overall district populations) and multiracial students (2.5% of the overall district populations) are underrepresented in AP® enrollment with 2.1% and 1.1% respectively. These same students are also disproportionately represented in in AP® Math and Science at 1.4% and 0.7%) and in Dual Enrollment courses at 3.8% and 1.1% correspondingly.

Figure 4.38 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

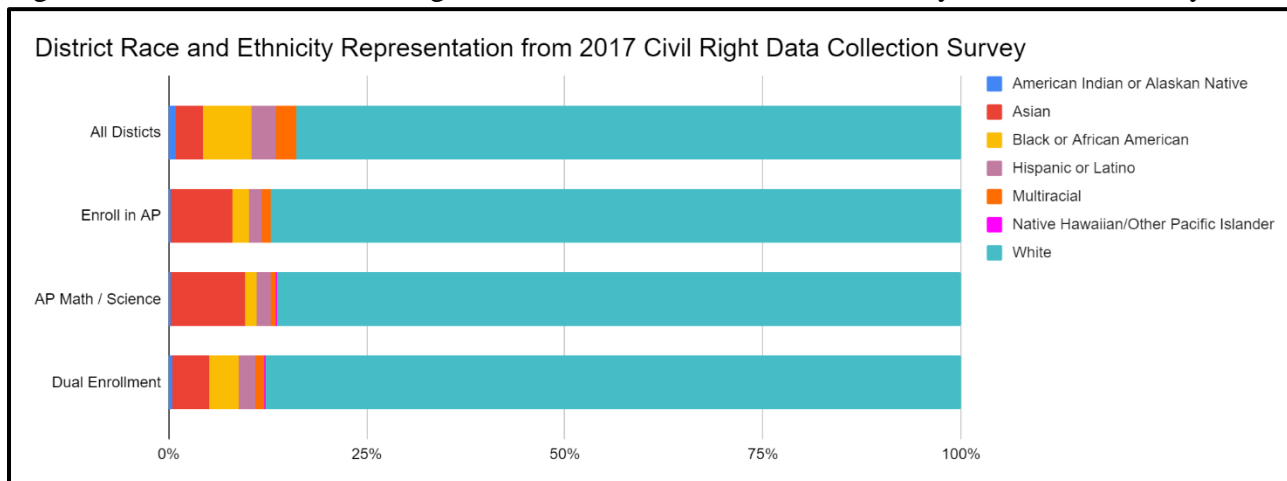


Table 4.38 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	All Districts Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	8313	2264	888	1916
American Indian or Alaskan Native	72	7	2	7
Asian	293	173	84	72
Black or African American	508	48	12	41
Hispanic or Latino	255	37	16	24
Multiracial	210	26	6	21
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	7	2	1	2
White	6968	1971	767	1683

District 1 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.39 and Table 4.39 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (1.6% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 2.9% of the enrollment of students. Additionally, the same overrepresentation in AP® math and Science courses with 3.3% of the total enrollments. For dual enrollment courses, Asian students are under-represented at 0.7% of all dual enrollments.

Similar to Asian students, white identifying students (88.4% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in AP® with 92.7% of the total enrollments. Similarly, white students maintain roughly the same disproportionality in Dual Enrollment courses with 92.5%.

District 1 data also suggest that Black or African American students (4.4 % of the overall district population) are underrepresented in AP® enrollment with 1.3% and AP® Math and Science with 1.1% respectively. Surprisingly, Hispanic and Latino students (3.0 % of the overall district population) are slightly overrepresented in AP® Math and Science with 4.45% enrollment.

Figure 4.39 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

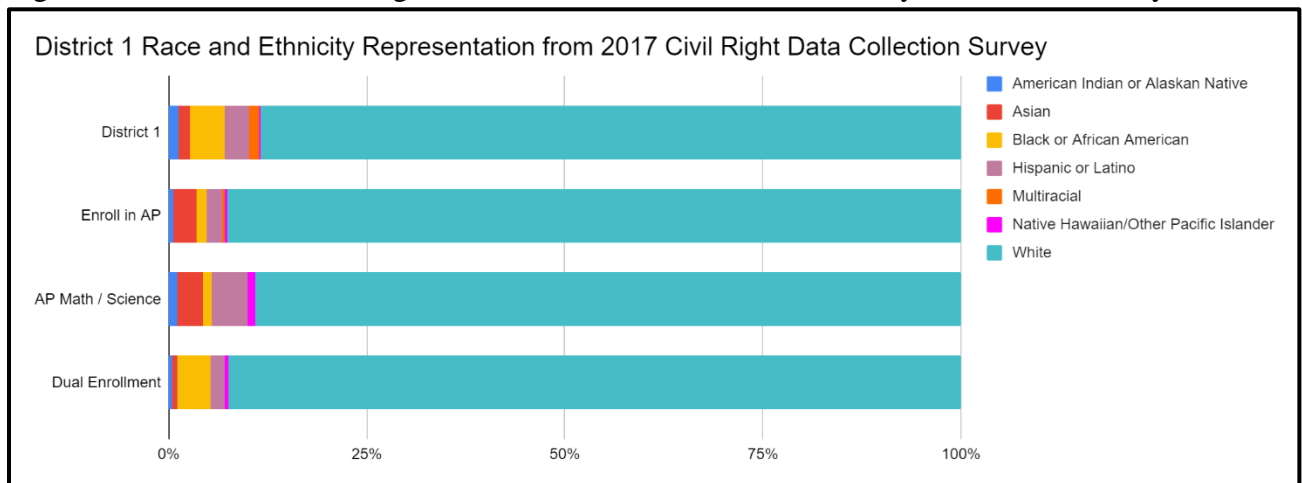


Table 4.39 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 1 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1584	314	91	267
American Indian or Alaskan Native	19	2	1	1
Asian	25	9	3	2
Black or African American	69	4	1	11
Hispanic or Latino	48	6	4	5
Multiracial	21	1	0	0
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1	1	1	1
White	1401	291	81	247

District 2 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.40 and Table 4.40 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (9.0% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 15.9% of the enrollment of students. Additionally, the same overrepresentation in AP® math and Science courses with 16.4% of the total enrollments. For Dual Enrollment courses, Asian students are under-represented at 3.4%.

Similar to Asian students, white identifying students (76.7% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in Dual Enrollment courses with 89.7%.

District 2 data also suggest that Black or African American students (7.9 % of the overall district population) are underrepresented in AP® enrollment with 4.2%, AP® Math and Science with 1.6% respectively, and Dual Enrollment with 0.0%. Surprisingly, Hispanic or Latino (3.3 % of the overall district population) students are slightly over-represented in Dual Enrollment with 6.9% enrollment.

Figure 4.40 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

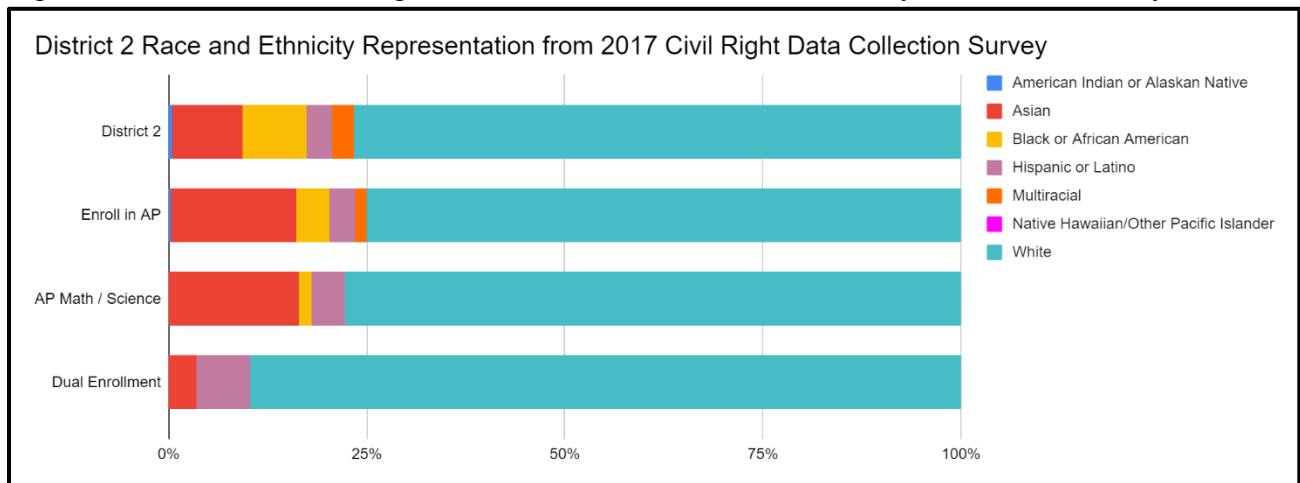


Table 4.40 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 2 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	947	408	189	29
American Indian or Alaskan Native	4	1	0	0
Asian	85	65	31	1
Black or African American	75	17	3	0
Hispanic or Latino	31	13	8	2
Multiracial	26	6	0	0
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	726	306	147	26

District 3 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.41 and Table 4.41 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (2.0% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 5.0% of the enrollment of students. Additionally, the same overrepresentation in AP® Math and Science courses with 5.6% of the total enrollments. For Dual Enrollment courses, Asian students are also over represented at 4.4%. Similar to Asian students, white identifying students (84.6% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses.

District 3 data also suggest that Black or African American students (5.4 % of the overall district population) are underrepresented in AP® enrollment with 0.8% and AP® Math and Science with 0.7% respectively. Hispanic or Latino (3.2 % of the overall district population) students are proportionally placed in Dual Enrollment at 3.2% enrollment.

Figure 4.41 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

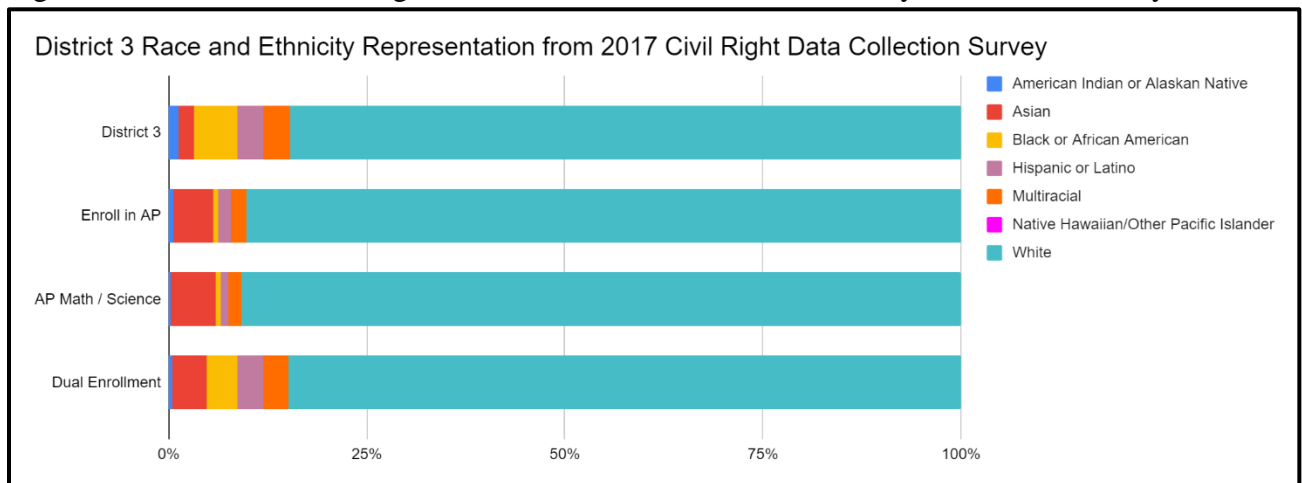


Table 4.41 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 3 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2039	666	304	252
American Indian or Alaskan Native	26	4	1	1
Asian	40	33	17	11
Black or African American	111	5	2	10
Hispanic or Latino	66	10	3	8
Multiracial	70	13	5	8
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	1726	601	276	214

District 4 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.42 and Table 4.42 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (5.2% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 9.4% of the enrollment of students. Additionally, an even greater overrepresentation in AP® Math and Science courses exists with 13.4% of the total enrollments. For Dual Enrollment courses, Asian students are also over represented at 8.3%.

Similar to Asian students, white identifying students (77.8% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses.

District 4 data also suggest that Black or African American students (9.2 % of the overall district population) are underrepresented in AP® enrollment with 4.3% and AP® Math and Science with 4.0% and in Dual Enrollment courses with 5.2% respectively. Hispanic or Latino and Multiracial students are also disproportionately under-represented in all AP®, AP® Math and Science, as well as Dual Enrollment courses.

Figure 4.42 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

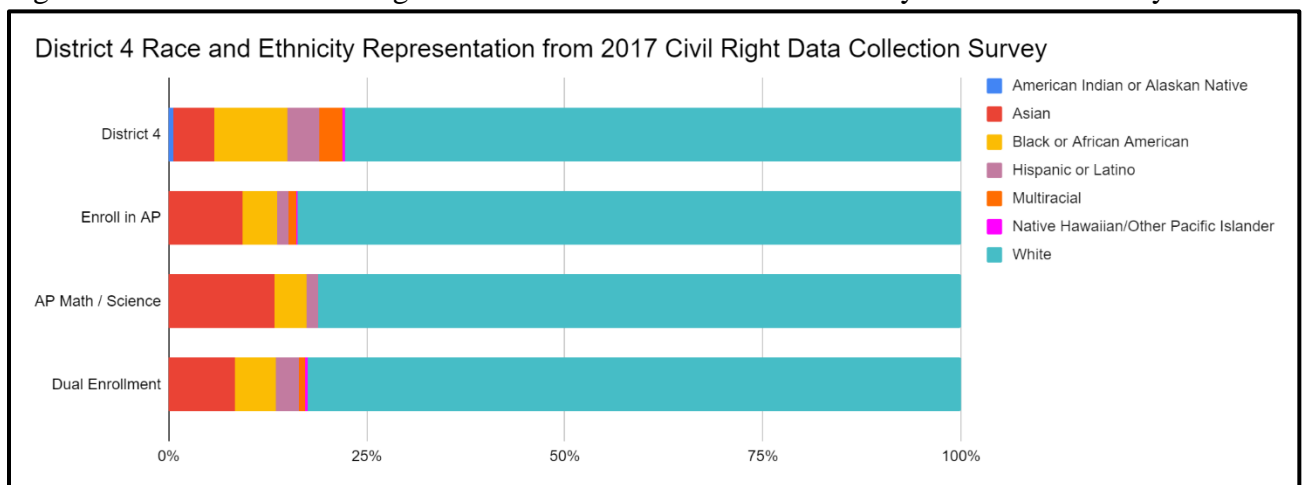


Table 4.42 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 4 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2188	468	149	324
American Indian or Alaskan Native	12	0	0	0
Asian	114	44	20	27
Black or African American	202	20	6	17
Hispanic or Latino	88	7	2	9
Multiracial	64	4	0	3
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	6	1	0	1
White	1702	392	121	267

District 5 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.43 and Table 4.43 showcases data for a less diverse district population. The data indicates that students identifying as Asian students (2.0% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 6.1%, in AP® Math and Science courses with 6.8% and for Dual Enrollment courses at 4.2%.

The district's Black or African American and Multiracial are not represented in Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science and Dual Enrollment courses.

Figure 4.43 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

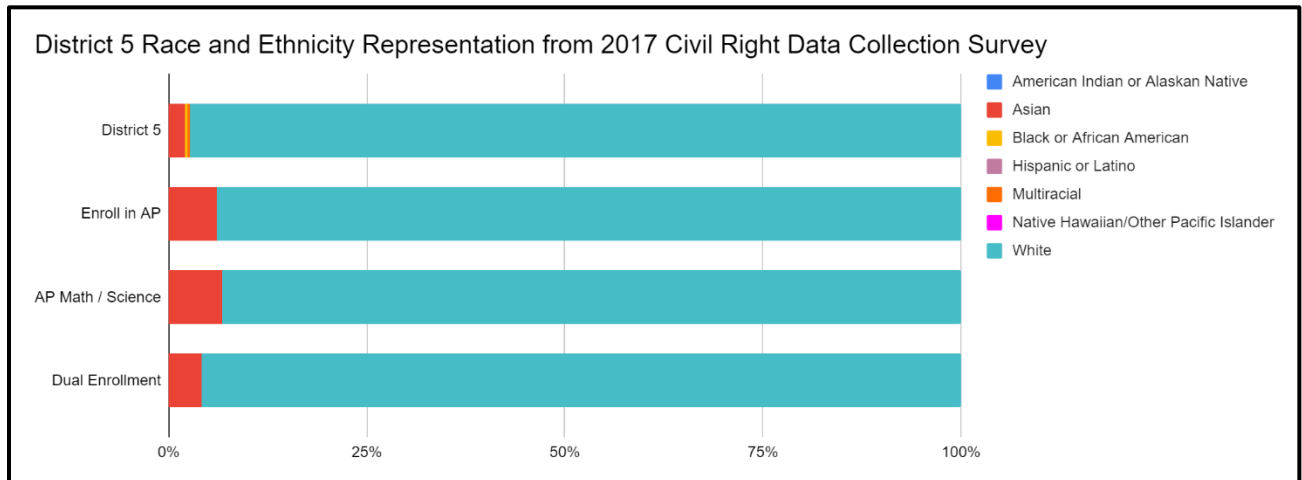




Table 4.43 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 5 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	543	228	118	72
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0	0	0
Asian	11	14	8	3
Black or African American	2	0	0	0
Hispanic or Latino	0	0	0	0
Multiracial	2	0	0	0
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	528	214	110	69

District 6 results from the CRDC Data Survey in Figure 4.44 and Table 4.44 indicate that students identifying as Asian students (1.8% of the overall district population) and white students (87.5% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) enrollments. District 6 data also suggests all other race and ethnicity groups (Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Hispanic or Latino, and Multiracial) are all underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) enrollment and AP® Math and Science courses. Interestingly, I note that District 6 does not provide opportunity for Dual Enrollment courses like the 5 other districts represented in this study.

Figure 4.44 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

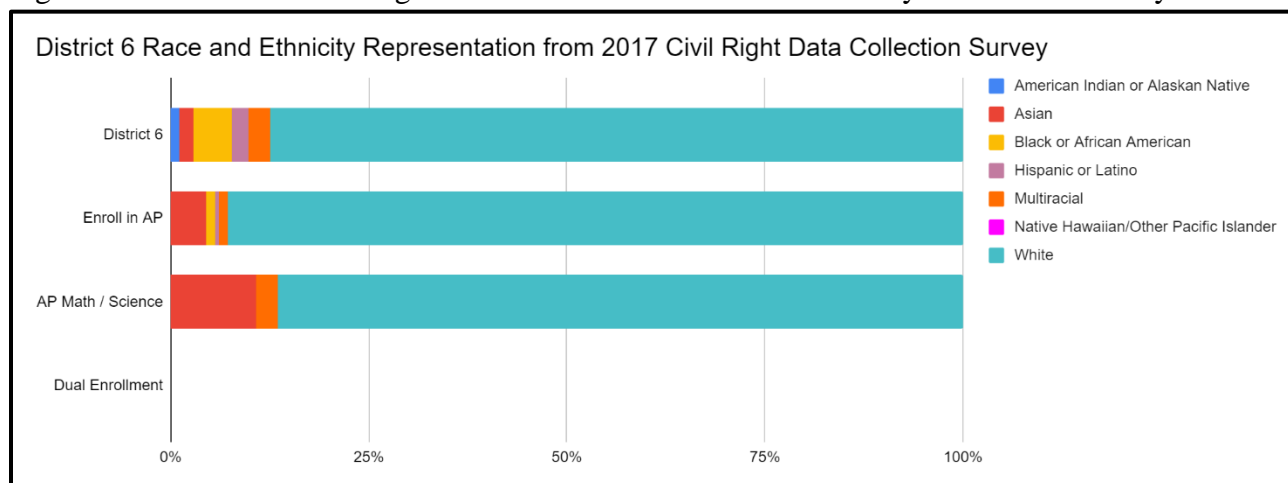


Table 4.44 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity

	District 6 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1012	180	37	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	11	0	0	0
Asian	18	8	4	0
Black or African American	49	2	0	0
Hispanic or Latino	22	1	0	0
Multiracial	27	2	1	0
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0
White	885	167	32	0

In summary, the data represented in this section (Figures 4.38 - 4.44 and Tables 4.38 - 4.44) highlights rather paralleled results for groupings of students across districts. More specifically in every district, Asian and white students are over represented in Advanced Placement courses while black, multiracial, and Hispanic or Latino students are underrepresented in those same courses. Interestingly, black and Hispanic or Latino students show greater representation in Dual Enrollment courses in a few school districts. More precisely, in District 2,

Hispanic and Latino students have greater participation in Dual Enrollment while black students have similar results in District 1. Additionally, in District 1, Hispanic and Latino students have greater participation in Advanced Placement Math and Science courses. Lastly, data highlights students in District 6 have no opportunities for Dual Enrollment courses when examining opportunities across the six different school districts. Furthermore, while students may have access in most districts to Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses, in District 5, the Black or African American and multiracial students are not represented in any of the specified courses. Ultimately, the data continues to represent some inequity regarding access to the Advanced Placement (AP®) and Dual Enrollment course offering within the study's high schools when examining the placement of students based on race and ethnicity.

### ***Gender***

Additional key highlights from the CRDC Data Survey for all districts in Figure 4.45 and Table 5.45 indicate that students identifying as female (48.7% of the overall district populations) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 55.7% of the enrollment as opposed to male (51.3% of the overall district populations) students at 44.3%. Additionally, only a slight overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in AP® Math and Science courses and Dual Enrollment courses with 50.8% of total enrollments in both areas.

Figure 4.45 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

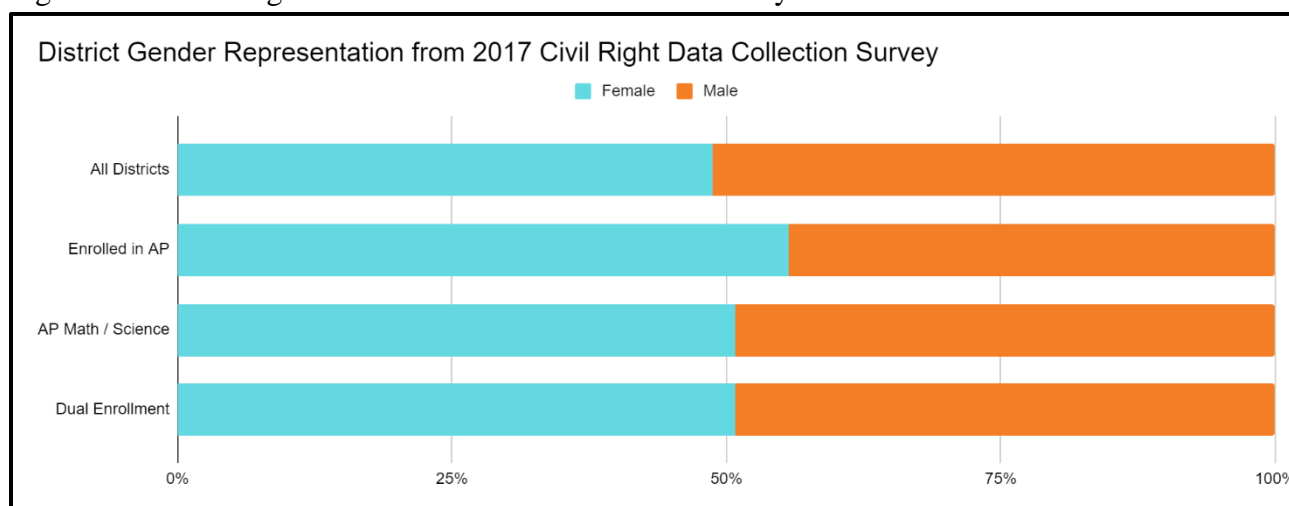


Table 4.45 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	All Districts Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	8313	1838	888	1916
Female	4052	1024	451	974
Male	4261	814	437	942

Similarly for District 1, in Figure 4.46 and Table 4.46 students identifying as female (50.4% of the overall district population) are over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 59.6% of the enrollment as opposed to male (49.6% of the overall district populations) students at 40.4%. Additionally, only a slight overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in AP® Math and Science courses while Dual Enrollment courses are evenly distributed for male and female students.

Figure 4.46 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

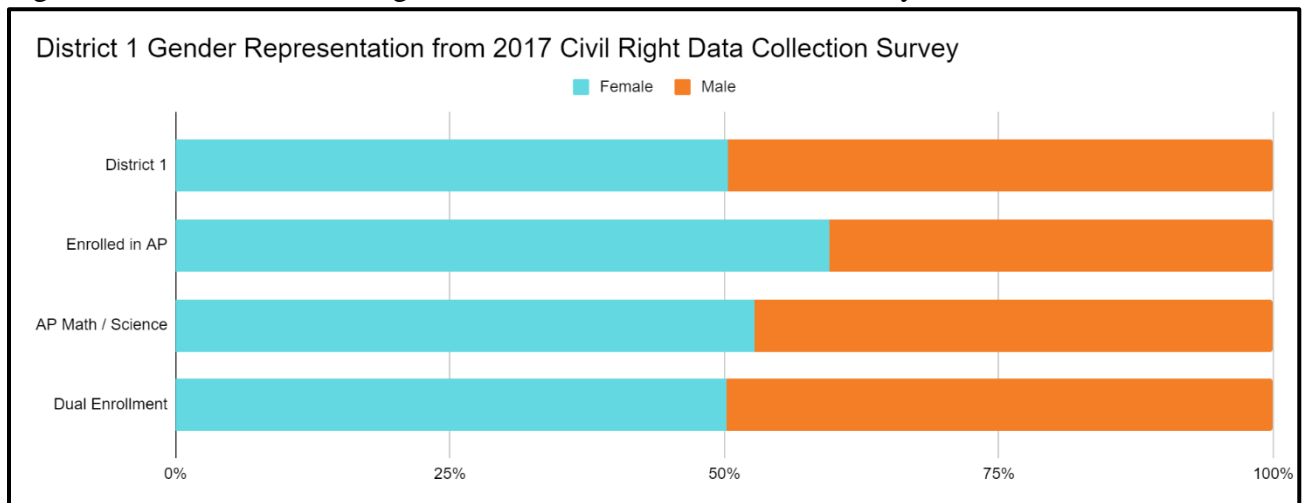


Table 4.46 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 1 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1584	314	91	267
Female	798	187	48	134
Male	4261	814	437	942

Interestingly for District 2, in Figure 4.47 and Table 4.47 students identifying as female (49.1% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in Dual Enrollment courses at 58.6% of the enrollment as opposed to male (50.9% of the overall district population) students at 41.4%. Additionally, a slight overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in all AP® courses, as opposed to the completed opposite for AP® Math and Science courses.

Figure 4.47 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

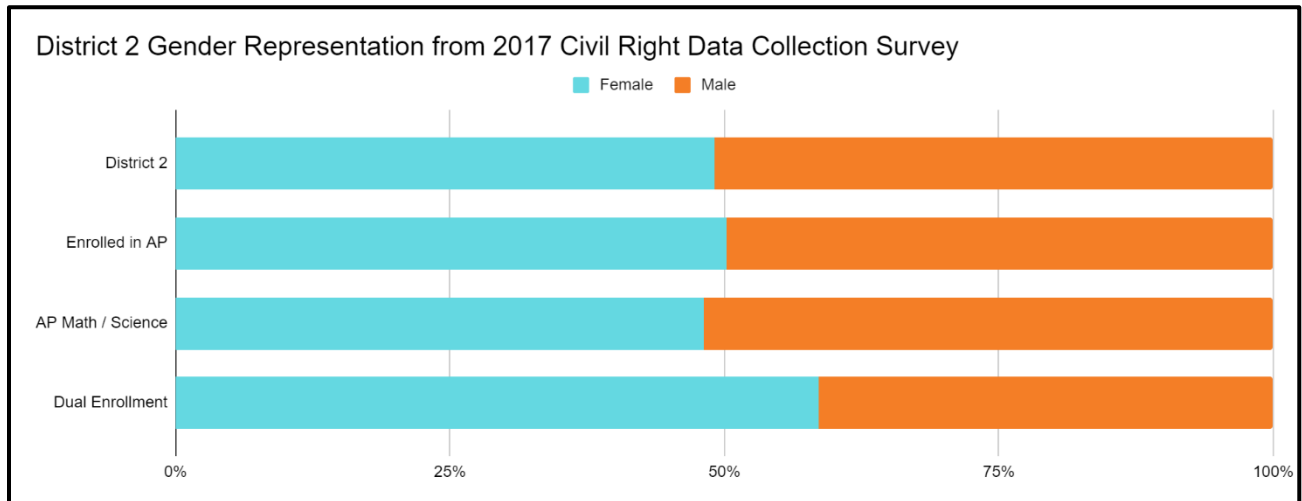


Table 4.47 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 2 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	947	408	189	29
Female	465	205	91	17
Male	482	203	98	12

In Figure 4.48 and Table 4.48 the data indicates that students identifying as female in District 3 (48.8% of the overall district population) are overrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 55.7% of the enrollment as opposed to male (51.2% of the overall district populations) students at 44.3%. Additionally, there is overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in AP® Math and Science courses and Dual Enrollment courses with 51.6% and 54.0% of enrollments, respectively, in both areas.

Figure 4.48 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

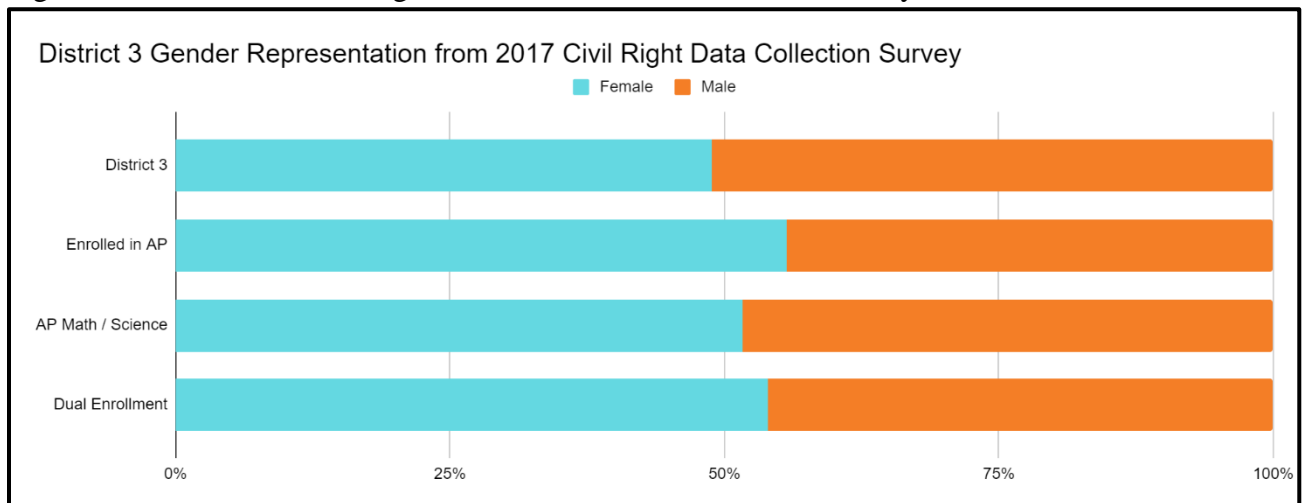


Table 4.48 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 3 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2039	666	304	252
Female	996	371	157	136
Male	1043	295	147	116

Similarly to District 3, District 4 data as represented in Figure 4.49 and Table 4.49 indicates that students identifying as female (48.8% of the overall district populations) are also over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 55.1% of the enrollment as opposed to male (51.2% of the overall district populations) students at 44.9%. Moreover, there is overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in AP® Math and Science courses and Dual Enrollment courses with 51.7% and 53.1% of enrollments, respectively, in both areas.

Figure 4.49 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

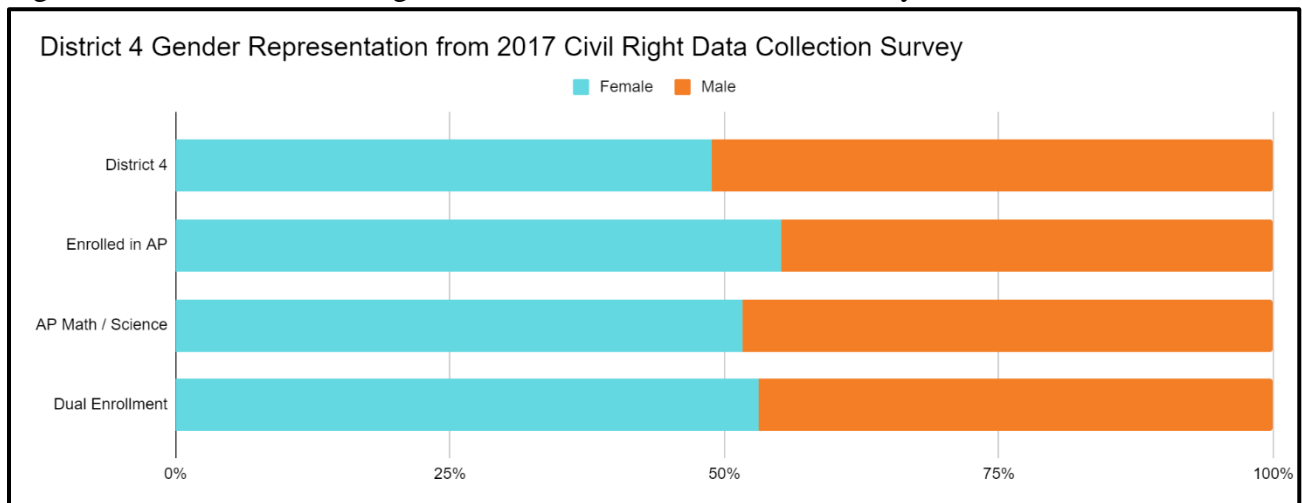


Table 4.49 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 4 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2188	468	149	324
Female	1068	258	77	172
Male	1120	210	72	152

District 5 data as represented in Figure 4.50 and Table 4.50 indicates that students identifying as female (48.3% of the overall district population) are also over represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) at 57.9% of the enrollment as opposed to male (51.7% of the overall district population) students at 42.1%. Moreover, there is overrepresentation for females as opposed to male students in AP® Math and Science courses with 51.7% of enrollments. Lastly, there is overrepresentation for males as opposed to female students in Dual Enrollment courses with 54.2% of enrollments.



Figure 4.50 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

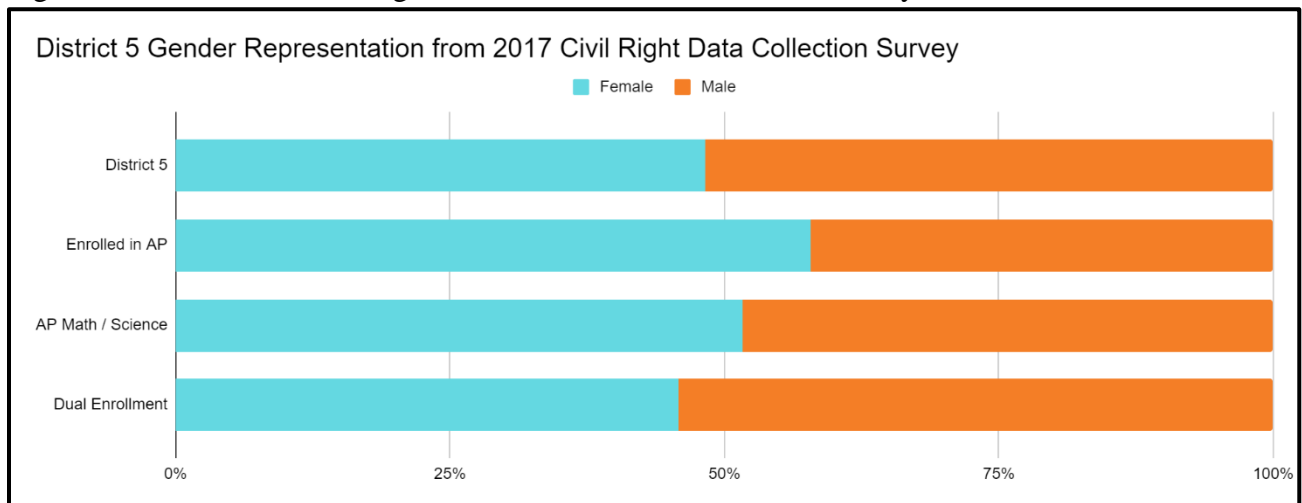


Table 4.50 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 5 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	543	228	118	72
Female	262	132	61	33
Male	281	96	57	39

Lastly, for District 6, as showcased in Figure 4.51 and Table 4.51 students identifying as female (45.8% of the overall district population) and male (54.2% of the overall district population) are relatively proportional to the respective enrollments in Advanced Placement (AP®) and AP® Math and Science courses. Interestingly, District 6 did not have students of either gender enrolled in Dual Enrollment courses like all of the other school district.

Figure 4.51 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

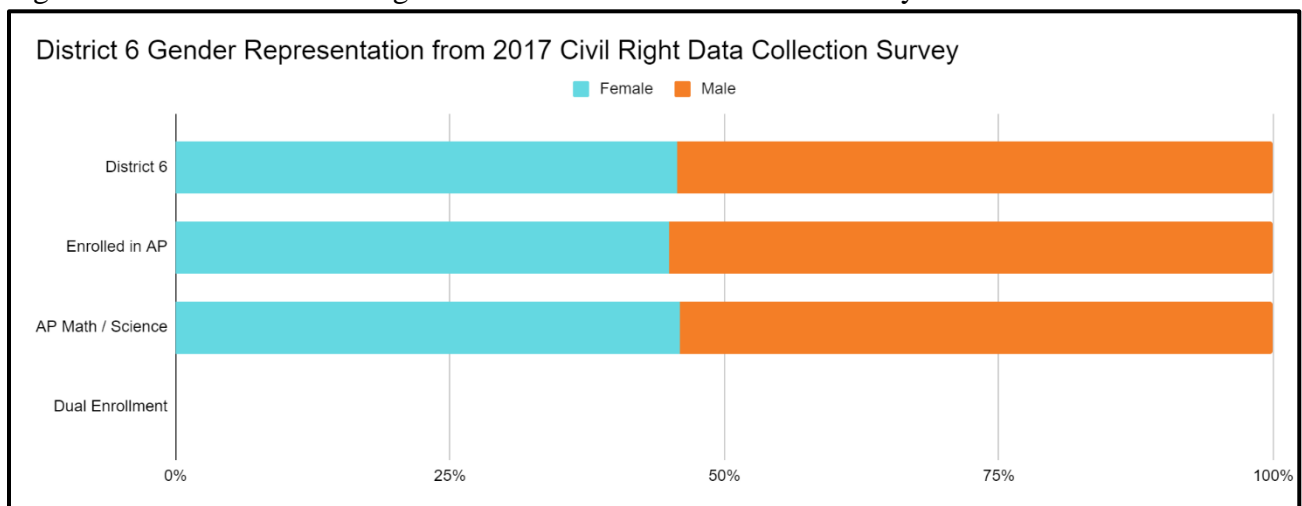


Table 4.51 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender

	District 6 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1012	180	37	0
Female	463	81	17	0
Male	549	99	20	0

In summary, the data represented in this section (Figures 4.45 - 4.51 and Tables 4.45 - 4.51) highlights rather consistent results for groupings of students across districts. In general, female students tend to exhibit greater participation and representation in Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses while male students see fewer participation and underrepresented in those same courses. Exceptions to the stated trend occurs in District 2 where male students are greater represented in AP® Math and Science courses, in District 5 where male students are greater represented in Dual Enrollment courses, and in District 6 where male students are greater represented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses. As noted, the data continues to represent inequity regarding access to the Advanced Placement (AP®) and

Dual Enrollment course offering within the study's high schools when examining the placement of students based on gender.

### ***Labeled Disability / Ability***

Some of the most discouraging highlights regarding students labeled as having a disability from the CRDC Data Survey are represented in Figures 4.52 through 4.58 and Tables 4.52 through 4.58. As observed in Figure 4.52 and Table 4.52 the data indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (13.0% of the overall district populations) are grossly underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.9% of the enrollment as opposed to students with no IEP (87% of the overall district populations). Similarly, students with an IEP are disproportionately not placed into AP® Math and Science courses at 0.9% and dual enrollment courses at 1.9% of total enrollments. To amplify the disparities this data showcases, only 17 students with an IEP out of 1,838 were enrolled in AP® Math and Science courses. Additionally, only 37 with an IEP out of 1,916 were enrolled in courses leading to Dual Enrollments.

Figure 4.52 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

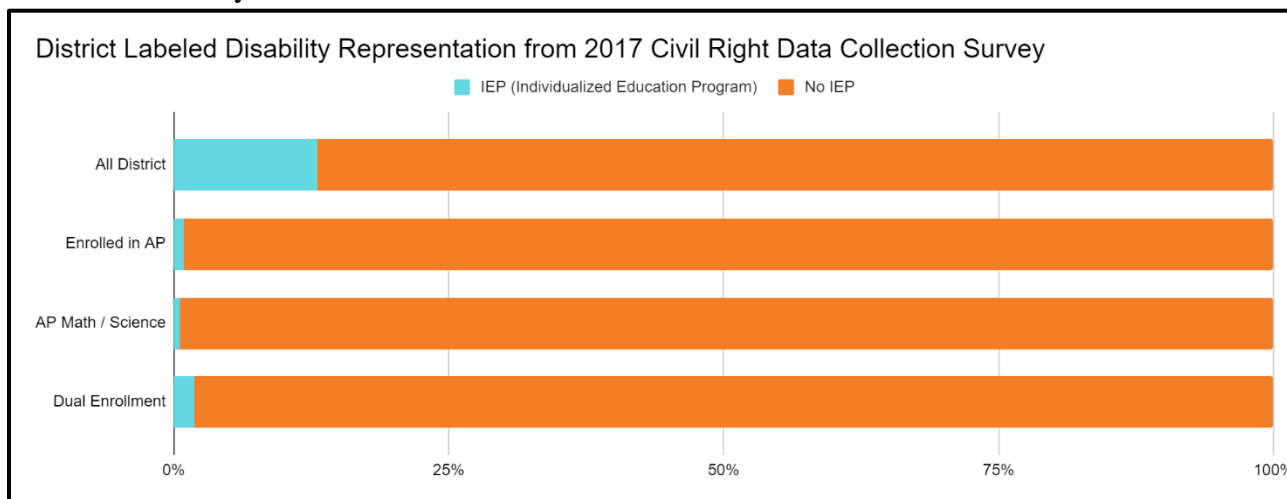


Table 4.52 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	All Districts Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	8313	1838	888	1916
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	1082	17	5	37
No IEP	7231	1821	883	1879

For District 1, Figure 4.53 and Table 4.53 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (11.6% of the overall district population) are also underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.6% of the enrollment as opposed to students with no IEP (88.4% of the overall district population). Similarly, students with an IEP are at an even greater disadvantage because they are not placed into any AP® Math and Science courses.

Figure 4.53 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

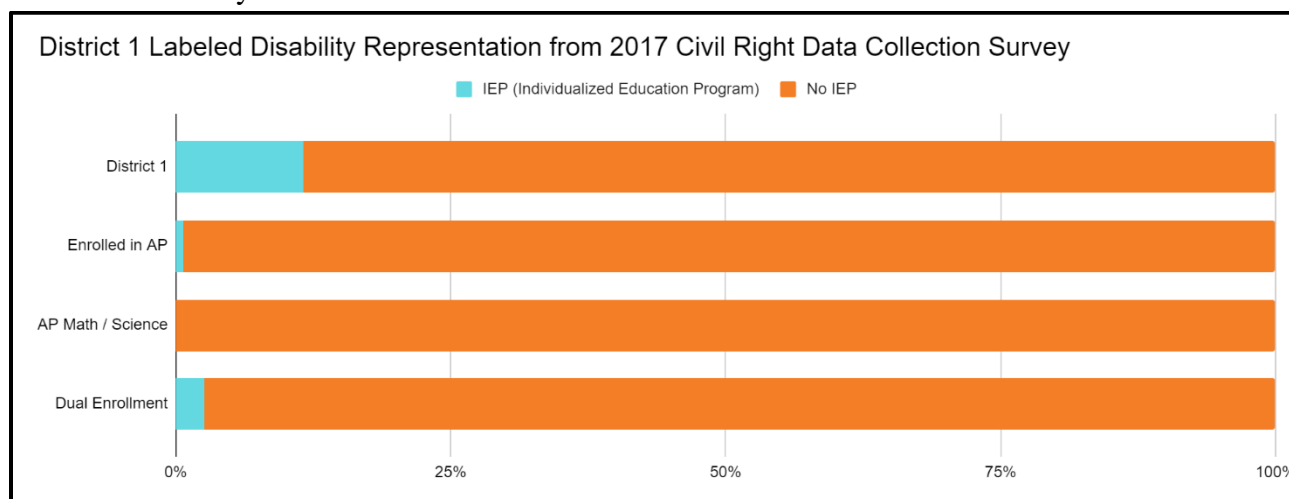


Table 4.53 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 1 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1584	314	91	267
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	184	2	0	7
No IEP	1400	312	91	260

For District 2, Figure 4.54 and Table 4.54 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (8.4% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.5% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at .05%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 0.0% as opposed to students with no IEP. Given the data set, it is important to note that the enrollment in the Advanced Placement (AP®) and AP® Math and Science courses represents 1 unique student that has access to such programming out of 80 in District 2.

Figure 4.54 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

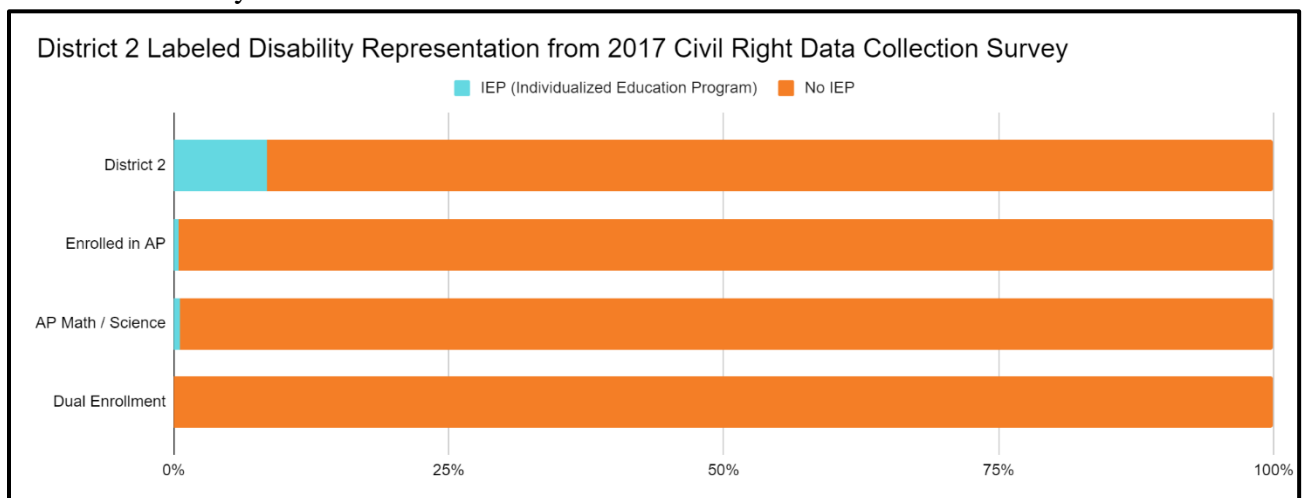


Table 4.54 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 2 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	947	408	189	29
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	80	2	1	0
No IEP	867	406	188	29

For District 3, Figure 4.55 and Table 4.55 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (9.8% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.5% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at .03%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 0.8% as opposed to students with no IEP.

Figure 4.55 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

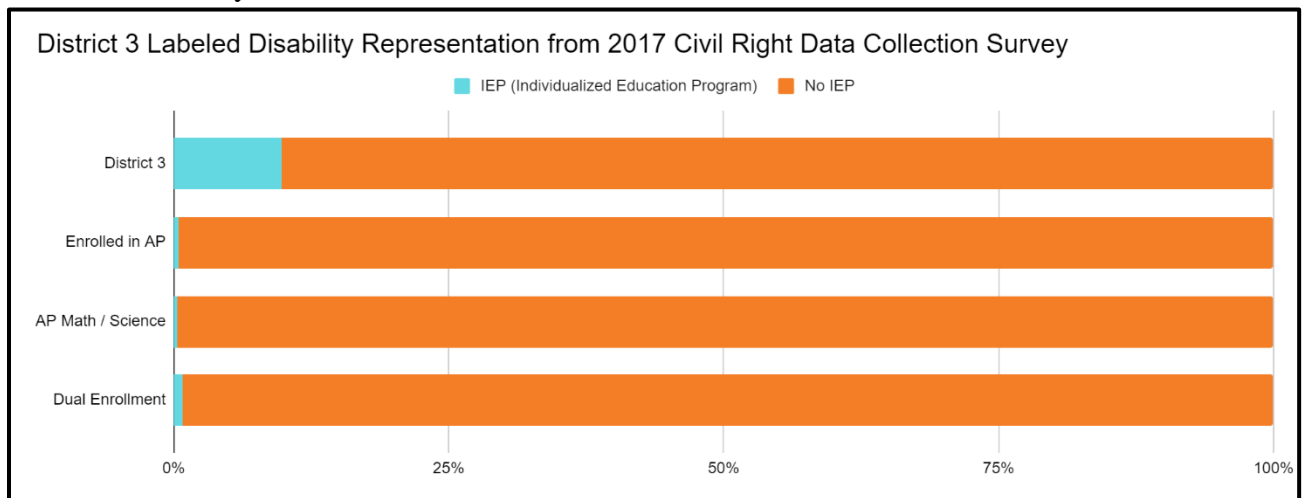


Table 4.55 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 3 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2039	666	304	252
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	199	3	1	2
No IEP	1840	663	303	250

For District 4, Figure 4.56 and Table 4.56 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (17.3% of the overall district population) are significantly underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.4% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 1.2% as opposed to students with no IEP.

Figure 4.56 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

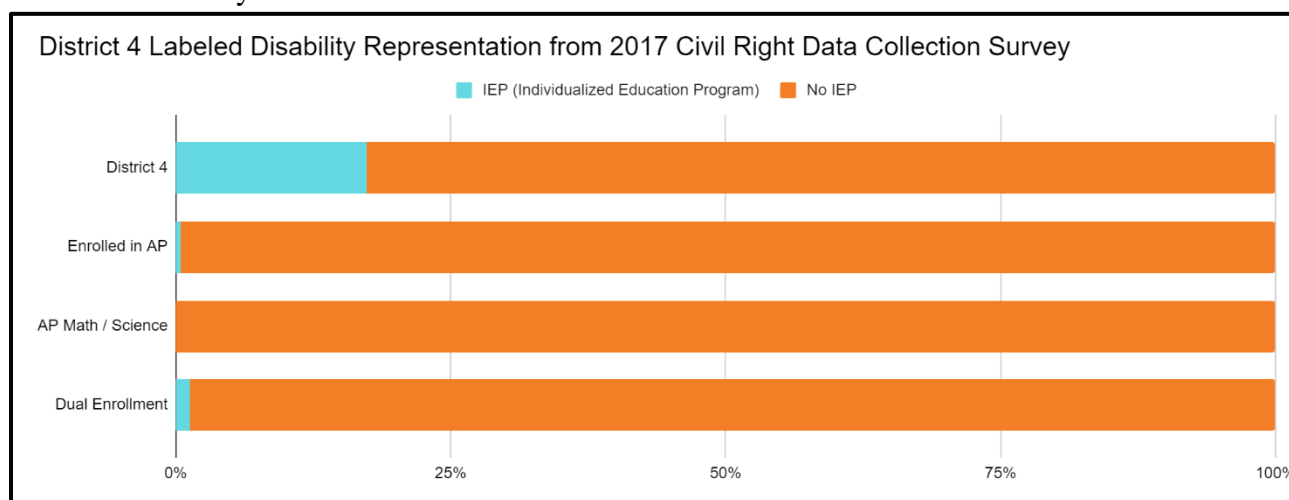


Table 4.56 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 4 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2188	468	149	324
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	379	2	0	4
No IEP	1809	464	149	320

For District 5, Figure 4.57 and Table 4.57 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (12.9% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 1.8% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at 1.7%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 9.7% as opposed to students with no IEP. That being indicated, it is also important to note that Dual Enrollment is less disproportionate for IEP students in District 5 as compared to IEP students in some of the other districts.

Figure 4.57 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

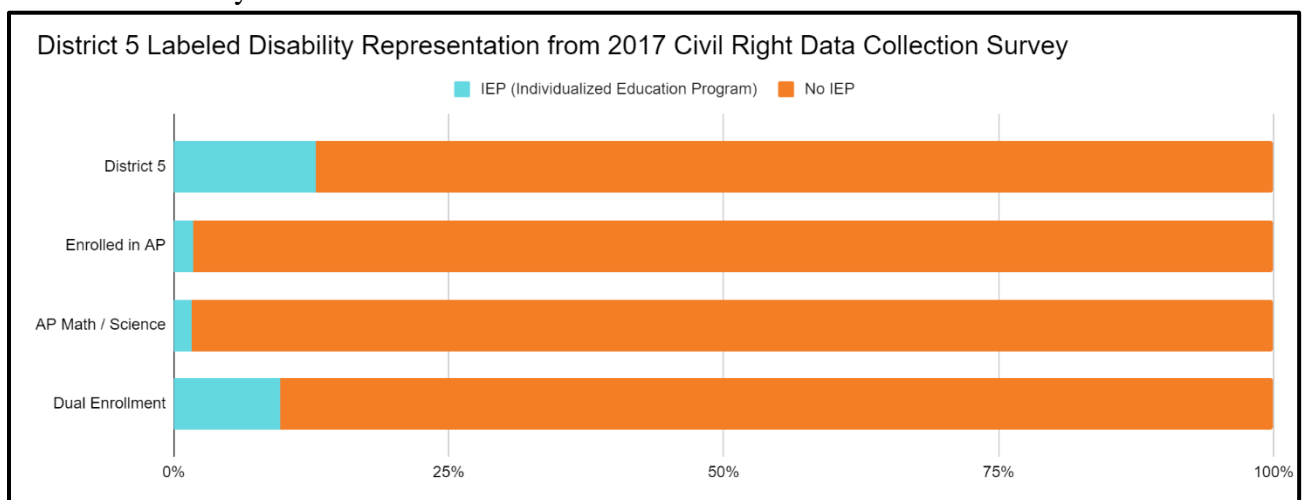




Table 4.57 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 5 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	543	228	118	72
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	70	4	2	7
No IEP	473	224	116	65

Lastly, for District 6, Figure 4.58 and Table 4.58 indicates that students labeled as having an IEP (16.8% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 2.2% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at 2.7%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 0.0% as opposed to students with no IEP. Similar to District 2, IEP labeled students are not enrolled in any Dual Enrollment courses for District 6 even though there are 170 IEP labeled students enrolled in high school courses.

Figure 4.58 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

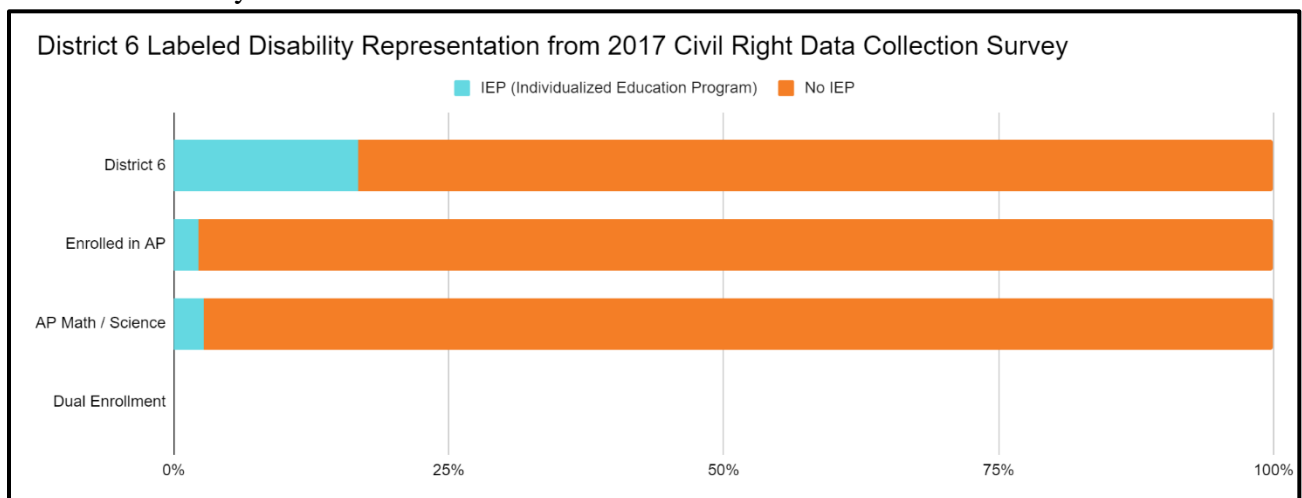


Table 4.58 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability

	District 6 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1012	180	37	0
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	170	4	1	0
No IEP	842	176	36	0

In summary, the data represented in this section (Figures 4.52 - 4.58 and Tables 4.52 - 4.58) highlights grossly underrepresented results for groupings of students labeled as having a learning disability across all districts. Overall, students labeled as having a learning disability do not have access to Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses like other students within districts. To further amplify the inequities that exists, not a single student labeled as having a learning disability is accessing Dual enrollment courses in District 2 and District 6, as well as accessing AP® Math and Science courses in District 1 and District 4. As noted, this data displays the extremely oppressive realities that exist for course placement opportunities within the study's high schools for students labeled as having a learning disability.

***Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / English Language Learner (ELL)***

The data for LEP/ELL status students is represented in Figure 4.59 through Figure 4.65 and Table 4.59 through Table 4.65. The data in Figure 4.59 and Table 4.59 indicates that students labeled as having a LEP/ELL status (0.8% of the overall district populations) is somewhat proportionate to AP® courses at 0.0% of the enrollment as opposed to students with no

LEP/ELL (99.2% of the overall district populations), however astonishing that no LEP/ELL students accessed any AP® courses. Similarly, these same students had no access to AP® Math and Science courses and very minimal access to Dual Enrollment courses at 0.3% of total enrollments. Not surprisingly, only 5 LEP/ELL students out of 1,916 were enrolled in courses leading to Dual Enrollments.

Figure 4.59 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

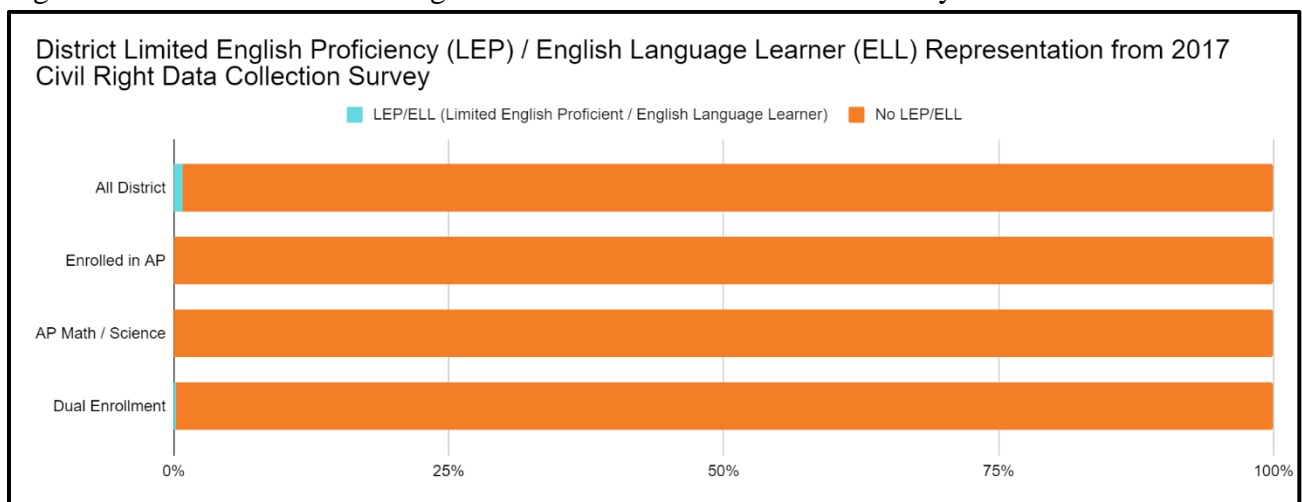


Table 4.59 All Districts Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	All Districts Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	8313	1838	888	1916
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	67	0	0	5
No LEP/ELL	8246	2728	1055	1911

For District 1, Figure 4.60 and Table 4.60 indicates that students labeled as having LEP/ELL (1.0% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.0% of the enrollment, and AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%. LEP/ELL status students are proportionately placed in Dual Enrollment courses at 0.7%.

Figure 4.60 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

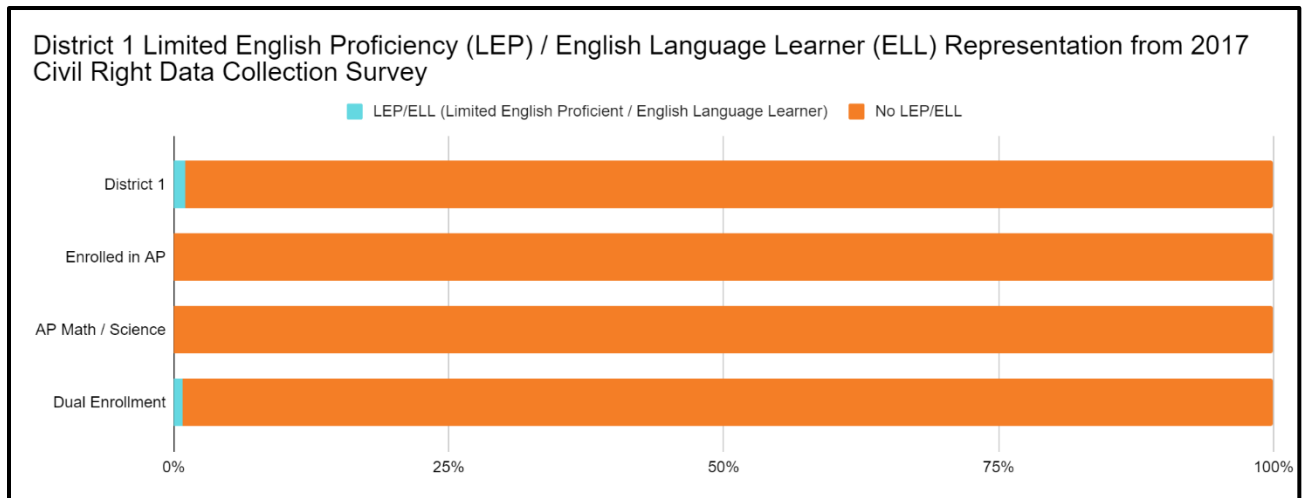


Table 4.60 District 1 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 1 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1584	314	91	267
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	16	0	0	2
No LEP/ELL	1568	314	91	265

For District 2, Figure 4.61 and Table 4.61 indicates that students labeled as having LEP/ELL (0.7% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement

(AP®) courses at 0.0% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 0.0%.

Figure 4.61 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

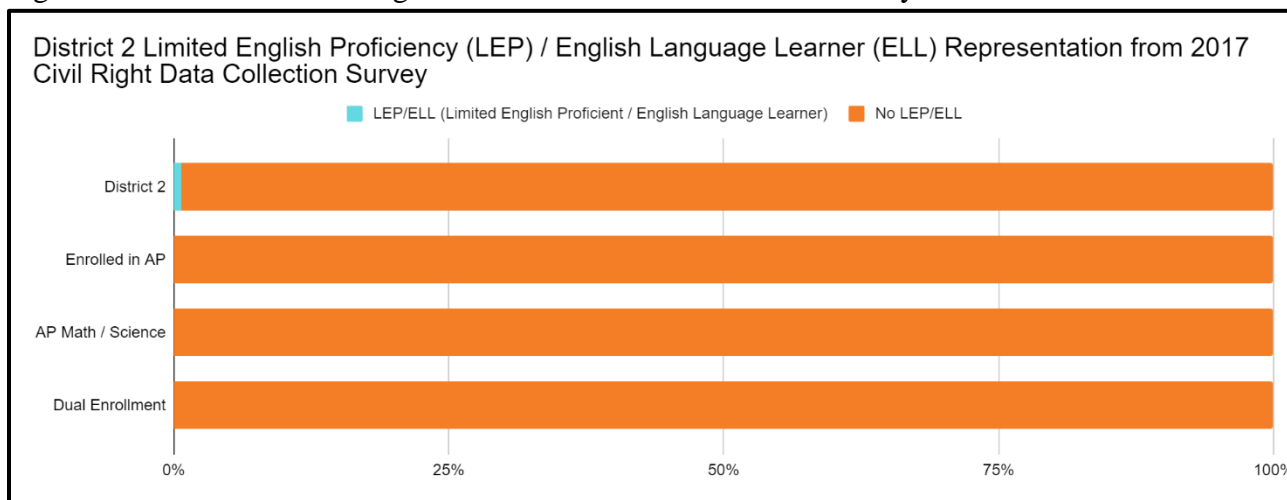


Table 4.61 District 2 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 2 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	947	408	189	29
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	7	0	0	0
No LEP/ELL	940	408	189	29

Similarly to District 2, Figure 4.62 and Table 4.62 indicates that students labeled as having LEP/ELL in District 3 (0.5% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.0% of the enrollment, AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%, and Dual Enrollment courses at 0.0%.

Figure 4.62 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

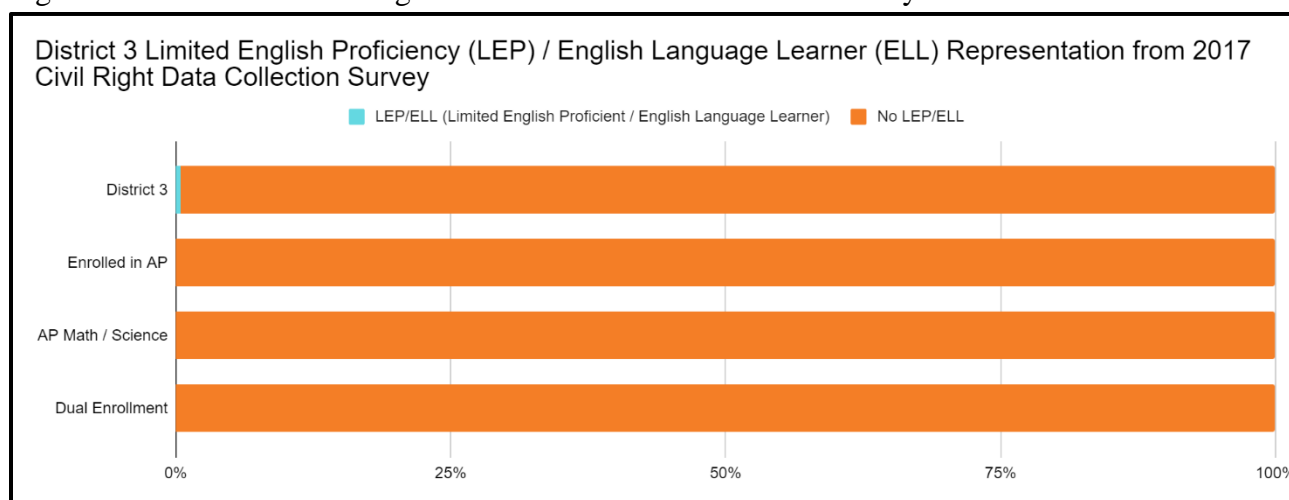


Table 4.62 District 3 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 3 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2039	666	304	252
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	10	0	0	0
No LEP/ELL	2029	666	304	252

For District 4, Figure 4.63 and Table 4.63 indicates that students labeled as having LEP/ELL (1.0% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.0% of the enrollment and AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%. For Dual Enrollment courses underrepresentation is minimal for LEP/ELL students at 0.6%.

Figure 4.63 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

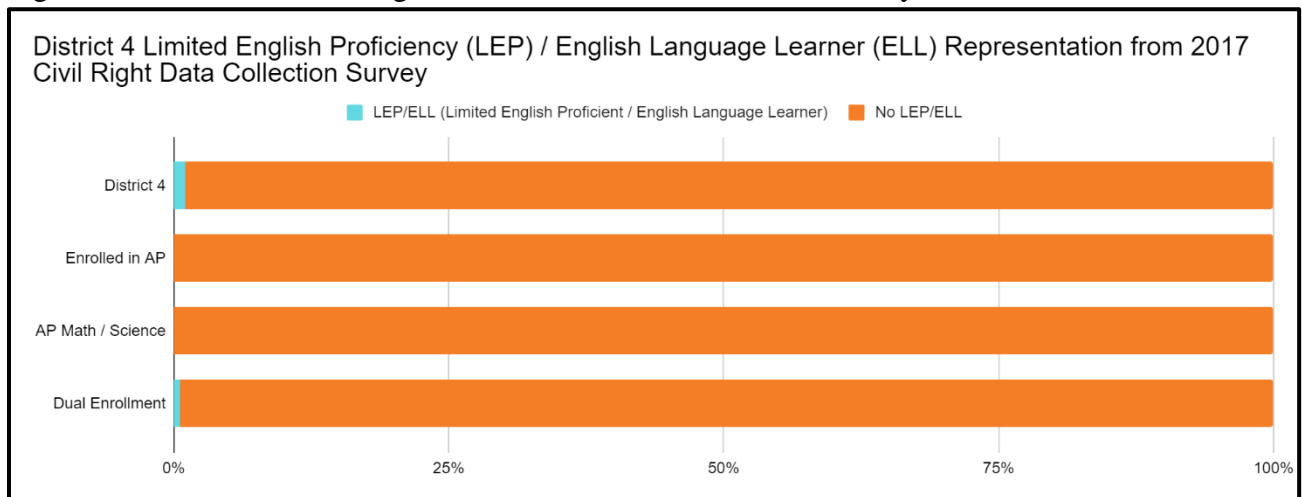


Table 4.63 District 4 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 4 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	2188	468	149	324
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	22	0	0	2
No LEP/ELL	2166	468	149	322

For District 5, Figure 4.64 and Table 4.64 indicates that the 1 student labeled as having LEP/ELL did not enroll in Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, or Dual Enrollment courses.

Figure 4.64 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

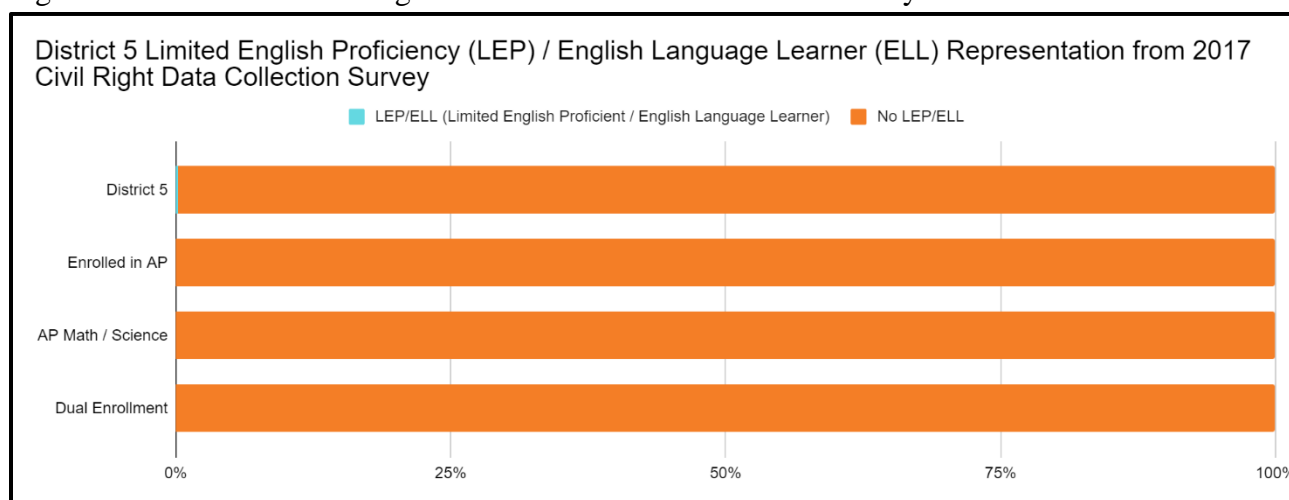


Table 4.64 District 5 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 5 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	543	228	118	72
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	1	0	0	0
No LEP/ELL	542	228	118	72

Similar to District 4, Figure 4.65 and Table 4.65 indicates that students labeled as having LEP/ELL in District 6 (1.0% of the overall district population) are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP®) courses at 0.0% of the enrollment and AP® Math and Science courses at 0.0%. For Dual Enrollment courses underrepresentation is minimal for LEP/ELL students at 0.7%.



Figure 4.65 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

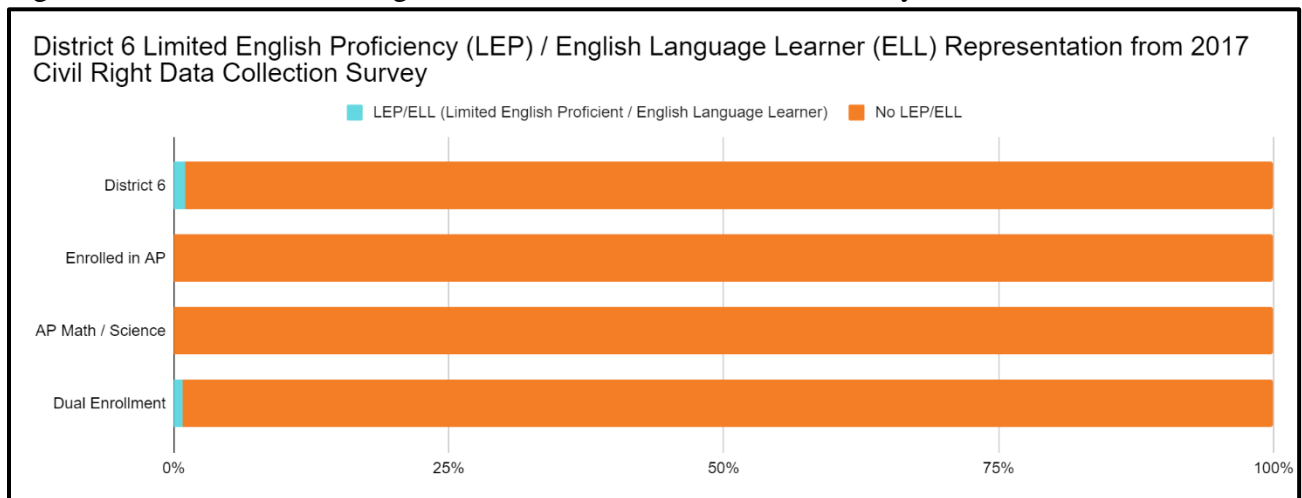


Table 4.65 District 6 Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL

	District 6 Enrollment	Enrollment in AP®	Enrollment in AP® Math / Science	Dual Enrollment
Total # of Students in Grades 9-12	1584	314	91	267
LEP/ELL (Limited English Proficient / English Language Learner)	16	0	0	2
No LEP/ELL	1568	314	91	265

In summary, the data represented in this section (Figures 4.59- 4.65 and Tables 4.59 - 4.65) highlights similar results for groupings of Limited English Proficient / English Language Learners across all districts. In every district, Limited English Proficient / English Language Learners are not represented at all in Advanced Placement (AP®) and AP® Math and Science courses. In Districts 1, 4, and 6 very few Limited English Proficient / English Language Learners access Dual Enrollment Courses. Furthermore, the data denotes inequity regarding access to the

Advanced Placement (AP®) and Dual Enrollment course offerings for Limited English Proficient / English Language Learners.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration. To provide a foundation for the next two findings chapters about how district leaders address tracking and acceleration and how regional influences and pressure influence decision-making and change efforts around tracking and acceleration, we learned how district leaders define tracking and acceleration, as well as organize, group, and provide options for their middle and high school students. Additionally, course enrollment data and Civil Rights Data Collection information was utilized to denote trends associated with the realities based on policy and practice comparisons.

In sum, the following represents what we know based on the data from this chapter:

- District leaders made sense of academic tracking through a very traditional and deficit-oriented view where educators intentionally or unintentionally assign students to stratified levels of different courses and curriculums that are very different. More specifically, leaders see tracking as a negative thing centered around an underlying belief where a deficit view of students/learners exists.
- District leaders held a very opportunistic constructed view of acceleration centered on advantages and access in our middle and high schools persists from the vantage point of the district leaders
- Over one half (58%) of the district leaders indicated that tracking is outdated and non-existent within their school districts; however, the course enrollment and CRDC data tells a different story, a story of marginalization and inequity.

- District policies and practices reinforce a hierarchical structure associated to academic tracking and acceleration which can be difficult to change / challenge.
- All districts offer multiple track course options (i.e., “Advanced,” “Local,” and “Regents”) and begin to officially sort and select students to various track options at the middle school level.
- Students identifying as Asian or white have more access to “Advanced” course placements including Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that track, while all other students (mainly students of color) have the least access to “Advanced” course placements and are correspondingly, placed more frequently in “Local” courses.
- Students identifying as female rather than male have slightly more access to “Advanced” course placements, as well as Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses.
- Students labeled as having an IEP or LEP/ELL designation have essentially no access or very limited access to “Advanced” track course offerings resulting in the same population of students being placed in “Local” track course offerings at grossly disproportionate rates as compared to other students.

The data highlights a clear need for change to address all of the equity issues associated with tracking and acceleration for the reason that the lived realities of schools do not match the district leaders’ words and sediments regarding academic tracking being outdated and non-existent in their schools. To that end, the chapters that follow will focus on leading change, addressing resistance to change, capitalizing on regional influence and pressure, as well as collaborating to maximize equity around tracking and acceleration.

In the next chapter, I address the following research question: How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools? More specifically, the findings center on what district leaders do about tracking and acceleration, what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts, and how they address race, gender, class, and ability hierarchies with course tracking and acceleration systems.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Findings on how district leaders address tracking and acceleration: Little is done to disrupt tracking**

*“Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” – the more things change, the more they stay the same.*

- Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1849)

A focus of this research study is to better understand how district leaders address tracking and acceleration. This chapter examines the second research question: How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools. As such, participants in this study discuss what they say they do about tracking and acceleration, describe what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts, as well as describe their attempts to dismantle tracking, and address the race, gender, class and ability hierarchies within course tracking and acceleration systems. Additionally, this chapter explores what leaders say they are doing and thinking to disrupt tracking and acceleration through the conceptual framework constructed using Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) dimension of tracking framework and Radd et al.'s (2021) lens of equity focused leadership. Furthermore, this findings section will offer insight into how some of the district leaders propose leading small change to tracking and acceleration systems by leveraging diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, conducting equity audits, establishing career pathways and personal learning options, as well as creating opportunities for student choice. Lastly, this findings chapter highlights how district leaders think about addressing resistance to proposed change.

#### **Little is Done to Disrupt Tracking**

In order to better understand what district leaders are thinking, saying, and doing about tracking and acceleration, as well to make the case that very little is done to disrupt tracking and

acceleration in the participant's schools and districts, it made sense to examine the data through the lens of Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) dimension of tracking framework. More specifically, this section highlights what leaders say they do or think they do about tracking and acceleration from the political, technical, and normative perspectives. Additionally, this section brings to light district leaders' very small attempts to invoke equity change through Radd et al.'s (2021) lens of equity focused leadership. As described above, this section is structured around what leaders are thinking and doing, and as a result, these findings will showcase the glaring fact that their work, while well-intentioned, unfortunately maintains systemic marginalization of students and the status quo.

### ***Thinking and Doing – Political Dimensions***

According to Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008), the examination of tracking and acceleration through the lens of the political dimension (referring to power and resource stratification within schools) aids leaders in understanding the nuances and concerns associated with tracking and acceleration. As such, all of the district leaders interviewed, both Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents / Curriculum Directors, talked about confronting new ideas, as well as examining policies and criteria to address tracking and acceleration in very small or minimal ways. Surprisingly, as the leaders described their efforts to confront, examine, change, and reform systemic practices, their persuasive words and statements lacked meaningful action. This claim is evident based on the course enrollment findings represented in chapter 4 of this study. As a recap, in all six school districts, tracking was evident based on the examination of course offerings and categorization of the course levels – “Advanced”, “Regents”, and “Local” in virtually all subject / academic content areas.

Addressing acceleration criteria (performance-based criteria that affords students the right to access or not programming and courses), as well as course requirements are small actions in which the district leaders placed emphasis on how they examine and address the inequities that tracking and acceleration practices create within their middle and secondary schools.

Superintendent Weagraff stated:

Our desire in changing the criteria of getting into honors courses or accelerated courses is not necessarily designed with any intention in watering down what we are doing. We are certainly taking away sometimes the current operations or methods and procedures or protocols for how we have always done it [referring to course placement and selection criteria]....We are really creating a clear definition of what our charge is: What we are really looking at? What we are we doing? What is best for all kids?

Superintendent Weagraff's belief that changing criteria for placement in honors or accelerated courses, helps to eradicate tracking within his middle and high schools is a strategy or action that actually reinforces tracked academic systems and structures. Similarly, Superintendent Williams shared how he was thinking about confronting and examining policies and criteria of acceleration. Williams detailed:

Looking at the criteria, questioning the criteria and starting to break those walls down helping families know that this is available, helping teachers know that, yep, you know we're going to make this available to students and taking a look at our practices.

Expanding on the sediments from Weagraff and Williams, Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlights the questioning of criteria. Lassard articulated:

What is the right criteria and have we followed up to say 'Hey, the students who have met these, how have they done?' [referring to performance in the courses] because where

we have looked at, on a case-by-case basis, it does not always hold up. You know, there is other non-tangible things that are really hard to measure that maybe have just as much of an impact on success.

Indisputably, the importance of questioning and challenging criteria is an example of how many of these leaders minimally attempted to address tracking and acceleration from the political perspective. Their words highlight the struggle they face to understand and navigate the complexities associated with tracking and acceleration systems.

Another component to addressing tracking and acceleration from the political perspective centers on questioning policies and practices. Many of the leaders highlighted the need and desire to examine, review, and question policies and practices. Superintendent Weagraff stated,

We just really want to identify and answer the following: Do we have a policy? Do we have practices? Do we have regulations in place that did inhibit our ability to change that the reality [referring to students have access to accelerated and rigorous courses]?

Expanding on the need to question policies and practices, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dube' describes efforts within the district to address communication of their practices. Dube' stated:

They are [referring to principals, teachers, and school counselors] looking at the handbook. They are looking at the language and the handbook. They are looking at like, everything. They really have embraced it [examining practices and procedures].

Additionally, at the high school this year they are actually starting work to ensure all students have a good life foundation. That, in itself, will help in our pursuit of having a more equitable district.



Assistant Superintendent Maxwell provided a perspective unique to addressing political pressures by pushing through the people that resist change or progress by maintaining a belief and vision tied to the district's strategic plan (a document that brings to life a school district's mission, vision, core beliefs, and priorities). Maxwell stated:

I am a broken record when it comes to that stuff [referring to maintaining the course and providing consistent messaging against political pressures]. You know there is that old axiom about this too shall pass... Well I have been in this role, almost as long as most of our teachers that are in our buildings. Right, I am my 32nd year here... So well it is not passing and I am still saying the same thing. It is not because I am saying it is for me, I am following the strategic plan. It is right here! It's written right here! As long as I keep pointing to that [strategic plan], and as long as I get other administrators to keep pointing to that [strategic plan] and teachers to point to that [strategic plan], and the board to understand [the strategic plan], then it is okay -- It is not going away! We are never going to get everybody there [referring to complete agree due to political and outside pressures] -- I get that! However, I am a firm believer in moving the bully circle. You have to get the staff, the bystanders, to stand up and say, 'Hey sit down and shut up!' Right? Once a few of the loud ones [referring to the blockers], once you have got, got a couple of those people, then 'Oh my God!' the dominoes fall quickly.

Maxwell's perspective highlights how small efforts to examine acceleration and tracking through a clear mission and vision of supporting all students helps to shift staff mindsets to get stakeholders on board with change for the benefit of all students.

Assistant Superintendent Lassard detailed how reviewing Board of Education policy and questing criteria requires open, honest, and frank conversations coupled with using data to leverage a change. Lassard proposed:

I think the best way for us is to relook at or examine our board policy and say, 'Here's the criteria!' If we are going to change the criteria, then we can use that as a third point leverage to help us change our practice. But, it's very hard to change a practice. Just looking at case by case situations and then say we're going to have a systematic change without going back to the board policy and having a real forthright conversation is not going to be enough.

While opening up dialogue and conversation are critical aspects to examining tracking and acceleration from the political dimension, examining practices is equally as important. Assistant Superintendent Lassard expanded:

The first thing is to understand how it works. The second thing, honestly, is the long-term impact and consequences. The third thing is to really to know your school and community and say 'What do we have here? What practices should we be challenging or maybe reconsidering that may not be beneficial to students. Sometimes we have practices in place that the adults are very comfortable with or the system tolerates because it doesn't create a lot of controversy or conflict, but it may not be the right thing for students....That's part of it. You need to be disrupting those practices, asking those questions. It does create some, you know, some tension. Sometimes it does create some pushback. But, we have to do that because it's like I said, either we are endorsing where we are, or we are pushing to have things changed for the betterment of all of our students.

That's a hard, hard thing for people [educators], because sometimes people [educators] personalize practices. They say, 'Well, this works -- it always works!'

Another resounding sentiment expressed by the district leaders focused on the political pressures they all face when attempting to invoke change to tracking and acceleration practices centers on maintaining the status quo. As highlighted by Assistant Superintendent Lassard, many leaders face political pushback from stakeholders that advocate through their constituents like the Board of Education to maintain traditional experiences for students. Lassard indicated:

You are going to have some people that are going to push back. You are going to have people that don't agree. You are going to have people that say you know we want that traditional option -- That kind of a thing and they're tough conversations, but they're the right ones, and part of that is having the Board of Education understand that and working with our unions to understand this.

Another perspective of small change to support detracking and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, Assistant Superintendent Samuels shared insights regarding the political pressures from stakeholders. Samuels stated:

We have like a pretty strong contingent of parents who are going to continue to push us forward that believe we're not moving fast enough. I think what we have started to see is a little bit more opposition, direct opposition, to some of the progress that we are making. I think there is a split. They're [referring to stakeholders] very much on either ends. There are folks who are, who are, in the middle. I think most people are generally supportive of what we're doing or know that their kids are happy when they come to school. So, they are not as necessarily involved in the Board-level meeting discussions.

Some of the study's leaders expressed concern with navigating the political pressures associated with small change to tracking and acceleration policies and practices. More specifically, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dube' provided insight into educating stakeholders and decision-makers. Dube' projected,

I think it is about educating all of our folks! I have directly run into a couple of situations recently -- They go hand in hand with, you know, I guess perceptions and feelings of some Board of Education members and I did not know how to navigate those situations. I just wanted to be very careful in what I said and how I said it.

Dube' brings to the forefront the challenges faced when working with groups of stakeholders to consider change to policies, practices, and systems. As described above, political structures can inhibit courageous conversations as illustrated by Dube'.

In the end, the qualitative data examined through the political dimension suggests that district leaders face a variety of obstacles as they confront new ideas, examine policies and criteria associated with tracking and acceleration. Additionally, this data represents what the leaders say they do and what they think they do to propose, confront, examine, change, and reform systemic practices. As a result, their efforts are action deficient and support the case that little is done to disrupt tracking. Surely, understanding how district leaders say they respond and push forward through the political perspective is important to understanding why leaders struggle to disrupt tracking and acceleration in their middle and high schools. In the next section, the analysis examines what leaders are thinking and doing about tracking and acceleration through the normative dimension.

### ***Thinking and Doing – Normative Dimensions***

According to Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008), the examination of tracking and acceleration through the lens of the normative dimension (beliefs, values, and perspectives held by stakeholders) aids leaders in understanding the longstanding traditions, norms, and beliefs of members of their school communities like parents, teachers, and leaders. As such, of the district leaders interviewed, only one leader discussed their commitments to rethinking or reframing beliefs and values in order to reform tracking and acceleration systems. More specifically, in this section, I highlight the data from the district leader, and represent how the leader sees and understands, not only their own, but their community's beliefs around tracking and acceleration. As previously stated, while the words of the leaders appear genuine and sincere, they lack actionable steps to effectively disrupt tracking and acceleration systems.

Superintendent Williams described how beliefs and bias plays into course placement and selection. Williams detailed:

It's pretty interesting when I think about that [referring to student placement into courses or classes based on recommendations or referrals]. I do think about, you know, sort of teachers implicit bias and administrators implicit bias. Especially at the early stages around who can or who needs remedial support and who does not. Often, I see those conversations are about our poor black kids who get targeted, maybe not targeted, but who seem to get placed into some of those classes [referring to low-level, less rigorous courses].

While implicit bias and beliefs appear to play into building-level discussions around the placement of students, based on the assertion of Superintendent Williams of District 2, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that the beliefs and implicit values of district-level leaders also

appear to contribute to the larger conversation regarding the placement of students.

Superintendent Williams goes on to share that:

We do not have remedial classes per se... We do not have tracking. We do not have a gifted program. We very purposefully do not because it has been discussed and shut down many, many times.

This statement is of significance because it centers on the belief that tracking does not exist in this leader's district / schools. Data highlighted from within Chapter 4 clearly showcases that tracking does exist within the leader's middle and high schools. This belief from the normative perspective does not connect to what is actually occurring within the leader's district / schools.

Superintendent Williams goes on to share that:

I think about things like access to RtI and special education. Our identification of special education services is disproportional. We have more African American boys, receiving services. It's disproportionately heavy in African American boys, so I think that, that's the way that sort of gets operationalized here.

Based on the information shared by Superintendent Williams it is evident that longstanding norms and beliefs that support services are necessary and/or required to assist students, actually reinforce some of the inequities associated to tracking within schools.

In the end, this qualitative data suggests that district leaders' efforts to examine and address tracking and acceleration are significantly influenced through their own experiences, beliefs, and bias, as well as those of community's stakeholders. It highlights a lack of meaningful action to disrupt tracking and acceleration. Undoubtedly, understanding how district leaders balance their personal viewpoints as they navigate commitments to reform and rethinking of beliefs and values through examination of the normative dimension is important to addressing

tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools. In the next section, the analysis examines what leaders are thinking and doing about tracking and acceleration through the technical dimension.

### ***Thinking and Doing – Technical Dimensions***

According to Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008), the examination of tracking and acceleration through the lens of the technical dimension (how school systems and their leaders organize space, time, people, and materials) aids leaders in understanding the research, data, and best practices to address reforms. As such, all of the district leaders interviewed talked about how they attempt to address tracking by restructuring programs, redistributing resources, and creating curriculums that provide more options and opportunities for students. In this section, I highlight compelling data that reinforces leaders' minimal attempts to understand and address tracking through the lens of the technical dimension.

To begin, Superintendent Williams shared his frustration with how teachers and other educators provide instruction and learning to students based on their own experiences with education. He stated:

I think a lot of that goes back to, especially in the early years...our ability to differentiate at the earliest grades. I think when teachers have sort of a preconceived notion of an excuse, the word rigidity is incorrect, but I think that a lot of our teachers, you know, think about some of the research -- our teachers teach how they were taught. And, so we've got a clientele of teachers who were middle class white women who had experienced success in school and are therefore, through no fault of their own, less able to meet the needs of struggling learners. They don't have those tier one interventions and they have got a focus on what should have been done in kindergarten first, second, third,

fourth, fifth grade, etc. So, kids who don't necessarily fit that model fall off into somebody else's domain.

Superintendent Williams continued by highlighting his belief that his district is trying to create and make available advanced level coursework to all students. He shared:

I think that, that's the way -- things get sort of operationalize here. I do have a lot of confidence that we are trying to make our upper level coursework and our general curriculum available to all kids. I know we are working on that, but I think we have got a long way to go. We have this mix of both urban and suburban [students]. I say that, in the most positive way! I think that is a huge strength of our school district. I also understand that urban is code for, you know, black kid is not successful, but I do not see that here.

Again, I see that as just adding to our diversity, which we welcome here. Again, you know, not to minimize, but we got a lot of work to do.

This data suggests that district leaders' efforts to examine and address tracking and acceleration are significantly influenced when adjustments are made from the technical perspective. Understanding how district leaders restructure programs, allocate resources, and redefine curriculums through examination of the technical dimension is important to addressing tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools. In the next section, the analysis examines tracking and acceleration through the lens of equity focused leadership.

### ***Thinking and Doing – Equity Focused Leadership***

According to Radd et al (2021), equity focused leadership requires leaders to transform how they think, act, and advocate change for the good of all students. It requires collaboration, reflection, and a commitment to addressing systems of inequity that exist with our middle and high schools. To that end, the district leaders examined within this study highlight their thoughts,



as well as some of the equity work they are engaged in which directly influences how they see, examine, and propose change to tracking and acceleration systems with their districts.

Assistant Superintendent Samuels indicates his understanding of equity focus leadership and various factors, especially acknowledgement of lived experiences that must remain at the forefront of decisions, conversations, and dialogue regarding student opportunities and access to academic offerings. Samuels stated:

You're going to have an experience with different kids in your class. You're going to be exposed to different, different strengths and different abilities and that's going to be limited, based on just how we [referring to educators] grew up as kids and then also how they [students] see themselves, and how teachers and how the school staff sees them. It's that piece or an experience that I think is the biggest factor, even more probably than curriculum knowledge, or outcomes. It's that experience part that I think really needs attention.

Acknowledging all perspectives and experiences, helps equity focused leaders address systems of inequity within the structures, processes, and practices in place in schools.

Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard shared a how leaders must guarantee students are exposed to curriculums and experiences they can related to and connect with to improve student engagement and success. As described, this work directly correlates to creating opportunities for students and eliminating the longstanding inequities that are associated to tracking and acceleration. Lassard stated:

You know the latest saying is 'windows and mirrors' in terms of am I seeing myself as a kid in my curriculum and in my classes. Do I have the ability to see into other people's worlds? Am I given him [referring to student] that opportunity? Then, you know, all of a

sudden, it becomes less about - how do I put this - racial identity, gender identity, all of this is very, very important stuff. The more we talk about it, the less vital it becomes because it is not that big a deal anymore. Right? It is not that big of a deal anymore, right?

Lassard contends that by focusing on small change by eliminating the inequities associated with tracking and acceleration that students will benefit from the experiences of courses and classes, all of which will establish new opportunities which become the new norm.

Assistant Superintendent Samuels highlighted a different component of equity focused leadership when he described his district's efforts to address equity through policy and data reviews. Samuels stated,

We moved forward last year when we were doing our policy review. Our Board of Education policy we wrote and introduced an equity policy that has some very specific goals to it, as well as some definition and commitment to that. We started last year, making what we call like impact reports so at 10, 20, 30, and 40 weeks we look at different sort of short-term impact data. So, whether that's our progress monitoring data, attendance data, discipline data, social emotional data that we've collected and we just aggregate all those different components.

From a different vantage point, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dube' indicated an approach to address equity issues through practices as opposed to policy. Dube' shared:

It is unfortunate that a topic, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion needs to have this feeling of pins and needles and being careful. We are not going to adopt, I mean as a district, we are not adopting a technical policy. We are just saying we are adopting some of the culturally responsive practices and pedagogy and those types of things, but we are

technically not officially adopting policy, because I think there is a lot of caution. I do not know if everybody sees it the same way.

This highlights how equity focused leadership requires persistence, commitment, and resilience to push forward through opposing views, resistance, and conflict. It brings to light how some district leaders shy away from change in a particular area to focus on another area that may be more relevant to their school district's systems, cultures, or perspectives.

Ultimately, Assistant Superintendent Lassard summarizes best the issues of equity often associated with tracking and acceleration based on access and opportunity. Lassard specified:

To understand equity, especially in a school setting, I think first is to understand that we live in an unequal and an inequitable society. Schools tend to mirror that unless we actively pursue other outcomes. So, we look at equity by saying that not only do students have equal opportunities, but we're actively seeking equal outcomes. You know a lot of people say, 'Well everybody has an opportunity to do what they want.' You know, what we're not going to do is stop kids from getting there. But we also have to acknowledge that within our society, things are equitable, to begin with and it's kind of like the old, you know, adage, starting everybody, starting at different places to expect some people to make up certain gaps the same amount or period of time as others is not realistic. And really, in a lot of ways, this perpetuates these inequities that exist as they continue within our schools. Schools are kind of centrally located to either reproduce those inequities or to kind of mitigate or in the best-case scenario, to actually you know, reduce these inequities and actually create opportunities for students.

This data suggests that district leaders believe their efforts to examine and address tracking and acceleration are significantly influenced through their action and understanding of

equity focused leadership. Understanding how district leaders transform how they think about, act, and advocate change for the good of all students is important to addressing tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools.

In summary, this section on the examination of the leaders' words through the lens of Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) dimension of tracking framework and Radd et al.'s (2021) lens of equity focused leadership highlights and reinforces the position that this study's participants do very little to disrupt tracking. More specifically data scrutinized through the political dimension indicates that district leaders are thinking more about confronting new ideas, examining policies and criteria associated with tracking and acceleration as opposed to acting upon or doing things to change or reform tracking and acceleration practices. Additionally, data analyzed from the normative dimension highlights that leaders are significantly influenced through their own experiences, beliefs, and bias, as well as through the personal viewpoints of other stakeholders as they navigate and understanding of tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools. From the technical perspective, data suggest that district leaders are thinking about how they restructure programs, allocate resources, and redefine curriculums. Lastly, all of the district leaders believe their efforts to examine and address tracking and acceleration are influenced through their action and understanding of equity focused change. They all believe they are moving and guiding their districts and schools toward change to tracking and acceleration systems in their middle and high schools. Consequently, these findings support the claim that the leaders' work, while well-intentioned, does very little to disrupt tracking and unfortunately maintains systemic marginalization of students and the status quo.

## **Leading Change**

Leading change within schools is a complex, challenging, time consuming, collaborative, and interactive process. It requires thoughtful planning, consideration, and visioning in order to shift perspectives, and encourage stakeholders to challenge the status quo. In this section focused on leading change, I highlight what the leaders say they are doing to lead change by diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; conducting equity audits; and establishing career pathways / personal learning options / creating opportunities for student choice. While all of these initiatives or strategies are important to leading equity change within PK-12 schools, they all fall short of truly addressing tracking and acceleration within middle and high schools. All of the initiatives appear to be tracking adjacent – they are the ways district leaders are focusing on equity and change, but they do not necessarily center on detracking efforts. Interestingly enough, the initiatives, themes, and strategies highlighted in this section are what the district leaders indicated as their means for addressing tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools.

### ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives***

All of the district leaders communicated a vision, commitment, and desire to engage in equity focused work. They all described how any change in their district is currently centered on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts. The leaders said DEI has become the lens or framework for examining processes, systems, structures, practices, and change efforts within their districts. Superintendent Weagraff pointed to how his district is using DEI to propose changes to areas associated with courses and curriculums. Weagraff shared:

Instituting any changes in the district it is important that the changes are connected to diversity. We are simply learning and understanding. We are at the awareness phase.

Obviously, the framework [Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Education Framework) the State [New York State Education Department] rolled out did a nice job laying out some of the expectations, but I think where they fell short, is the fact that the only thing a school district really needs to do is basically create a committee. There really is not any institutional work that is mandated. I think you're required to look at your policies and identify whether or not they're restrictive in any way to keep students from opportunities, but it doesn't tell you that you have to make changes. For us, it is a difficult journey, because it just feels like we are going down this road alone in. Our Board of Education in some ways has gotten cold feet and really they have had a hard time supporting the initiative. They do support the initiative. They just struggled to support. There are steps to follow along this initiative. One of those steps is creating surveys. They [Board of Education] are reluctant to roll surveys out because they just feel like the community needs to have a better education on the process of where we are headed. And, there, and a lot of times, especially in this environment, everything is stretched thin and we're seeing challenges from every direction. I would say the same with classes. You know, in one district, if you have two middle schools, one group may say, "Hey, we have a tougher situation over here." There are groups as well that say, "We have less kids, but more challenges." It is hard! I think we are really saying we are not going to just say, "It's equal for everybody." We are going to look closely at the data -- What we know and we are going to focus and prioritize accordingly.

Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard described how his district uses DEI to examine resources and opportunities for students. Lassard stated:

We focus on the idea of looking at our staffing, our resources, and we're putting that where we feel there's the most need. In the past, we are very much about everybody gets equal and, as we know, you know fair isn't always equal, right? If we know schools are doing really well and they're excelling and they're great and we have additional resources we really have to focus on the other schools that need those additional resources, whether it be counselors, social workers, smaller class size, additional special education teachers, a family engagement specialist, somebody who works with restorative practices. All of those things have been helpful and were kind of turning those schools in a different direction, and people are starting to see the change. Being in all of the buildings, at some point throughout each week, pretty much when I walk in those two schools, there's a different energy. There's an optimism. There's an excitement. There's a feeling of we're working together as a team to improve our outcomes, but also build relationships with our community members, build relationships with the students, and be proud of the work we're doing so. I think that to me is huge, to see that and we're having more and more of those conversations about allocating resources. We have to start holding up some of the concern areas, shining those lights to our partners that we have long neglected. You have to have some difficult conversations about inequities and everybody feeling like things are equal.

These data suggest that district leaders communicate a commitment and desire to engage in equity focused work, but struggle to make the full connection to inequities associated to tracking and acceleration. They express a willingness to lead this work and shared that they are doing this work within their districts, yet their lack of clarity and understanding lends me to believe that their level of awareness, as well as own understanding of DEI is making it difficult

for them to lead and succeed with this important work. These leaders must recognize that examining and addressing tracking and acceleration through a variety of systems and structures is engaging and supporting DEI work. Understanding how district leaders solicit partnership and transform how they think about, act, and advocate change for the good of all students is important to addressing tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools. In the next section, I highlight how a district leader said they use equity audits to address tracking and acceleration in their middle and high schools.

### ***Conducting Equity Audits***

One of the district leaders shared how they have started the process, through regional efforts, to engage in equity-focused initiatives like equity audits. Assistant Superintendent Samuels, described efforts to conduct equity audits as a means of bringing data to the forefront of conversations to highlight a need for change to tracking and acceleration systems. While the practice of conducting equity audits is a relatively new strategy or practice for the school leaders, it is important to note that all of the leaders stated that they examine and analyze data to make decisions. That being stated, Assistant Superintendent Samuel's district appeared further along the path of conducting equity audits to address tracking and acceleration in their middle and high schools. Samuels shared:

I think the biggest area to focus, is not just looking at the data, but looking at the intersectionality [of students] so not only those subgroups [referring to common identifies like race, gender, socioeconomic status], but how those subgroups interact. So, we know that the majority of our students fall into the low socioeconomic level, free and reduced lunch bucket, are also our students of color. Understanding that sort of the nuance between that is something that we have continually tried to do over the past couple of



years. I think both current and the historic information is huge and represents moments in time in which policies have changed. We ask ourselves, how did that impact? Going forward we are looking at trend data. Each year we have increased access with no impact on the outcome. It is those important messages we share. We sort of say, ‘Hey we have three times as many kids in AP [advanced placement classes / courses] as we did 10 years ago and scores haven't suffered. Let's continue to just provide those, those opportunities for kids on an ongoing basis.’ The data [referring to our data], along with pairing-up with national organizations to see what NCTM [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics] says about math instruction because they are a really good resource our teachers trust. They trust those resources and trust that vision.

In summary, this data suggests that district leaders consider leading change by examining and addressing tracking and acceleration by means of conducting equity audits. Understanding the realities and the disparate impact of tracking and acceleration generated from equity audit data highlights a need for change to tracking and acceleration systems. It is critically important, but only the first step in leading change to these systems. This work requires additional engagement and commitment. Conducting equity audits as a standalone change effort will not in and of itself lead to detracking of course curriculums and increased access to course acceleration for all students. As described by the leaders, the data tells the story that change is necessary to restructure programs, allocate and redefine curriculums so that all students have access to high quality curriculums and instructional opportunities in middle and high schools. In the next section, the analysis examines leading change through the establishment of creating career pathways.

### *Establishing Career Pathways / Personalized Learning Options / Creating Student Choice*

One of the study's school districts as described by their district leaders shared how they are leading change to tracking and acceleration systems by establishing career pathways for all students. Superintendent Weagraff and Director of Curriculum & Instruction Pope described efforts they are making to shift the narrative around academic tracking by creating options and pathways for students. Superintendent Weagraff stated:

I think sometimes there is a negative connotation associated with pathways. They see it as we're tracking because I think people sometimes jump immediately to kids who are more advanced versus kids who are probably struggling...There are instances / situations, I guess we use the word, maybe pathway, to be a similar perspective, but there are, you know, realistically places where when we put kids into a certain set of courses or course work it does lead to or track them into perhaps a consistent manner of scheduling. You know, Project Lead the Way is an example [of a pathway]. Once you are in that [track] you make the decision take the first course. It does lead to a series of courses that do finalize with the capstone projects. So, that to me, that's it, that is a tracking system because they're [students] tracked into from start to finish, and that is for a particular program that benefits their learning.

A key component that is inferred by Superintendent Weagraff when describing pathways as a form of tracking, different from the traditional sense, is that the pathway system affords all students the opportunity to be the decision-making to embark on a given pathway. Furthermore, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Pope more technically describes how pathways can be used to benefit student through flexibility based on student interest. Pope communicated:

We are working on that right now with changes in our district for next year. With all the shifts, we are trying to build in a variety of opportunities for students at middle level so they can have those experiences and make some decisions as they move into high school. Part of that process is really mapping out for students' different pathways that they can take -- whether it's fine arts or an MST [ Mathematics, Science, Technology] or STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] or humanities [English, Social Studies, World Language]. And in giving them [students] that opportunity to have some experiences so they then can make a decision as they go into high school, you know, that first year of high school. For us, it is really about getting the students the requirements that they need most. For ninth graders there's not a lot of variety in their schedule, in what they take. You know, they all take the same core courses. They get some of their graduation credits right out of the way and then they can move on from there. I really think that's what we're working on [options and pathways]. We are trying to find those pathways for students. We are trying to be flexible within those pathways. So, a student may make a decision in middle school that they want to go down the STEM route, but then they have a niche for fine arts, maybe media arts or communication arts, that's more on the artistic side, so they make changes and go into a fine arts pathway. Allowing students that flexibility to really think, that is what it's about! Also helping students have experiences early on, so they can make those decisions [regarding pathways] while giving them that flexibility.

Another of the district leaders described how schools need to change tracking and acceleration systems by thinking differently about systems and structures. More specifically, Superintendent Skinner highlighted work that essential expands on what Superintendent

Weagraff and Director Pope describe as creating learning pathways to create and construct personalized learning options. Skinner stated:

I would love to create a system that tracked in a different way. That actually tracked, you know, based on maybe a career cluster and develop some pathways for the career clusters, which is still tracking. I mean, you're putting kids in a track or they're putting themselves in the track, but I would like to think my goal is really about relevance. It's taking the learning that's happening and getting them [students] to engage with it in a way that's directly linked to the real world and careers -- places that they are headed toward. I don't want their [student] education to be something that's done to them, that they suffer, and endure until they can get out and actually go focus on what they're interested in. I would like they're [student] learning here to be relevant, because I think it's a lot more powerful that way. If our definition of tracking is that kids are all getting a smattering of lots of different things and they're all getting the same. If any departure from that is considered tracking this would be an expansion of tracking, but tracking along student interest and passion while not giving them a diminished experience, giving them a different experience, based on their interest, based on what they are choosing for themselves.

Superintendent Skinner expanded by stating:

I think the personalized learning piece might be the bigger piece of that [referring to new learning systems and structures] because when kids are interested, their capacity for challenging work changes dramatically, um, interest -- it's just like comprehension. When you say what grade-level is a kid comprehending it, who the hell knows. It depends on what they're reading. I mean, I'll give you a measure, but if they are bored out of their

minds, it'll be below what they're really capable of. As we contemplate diversity equity and inclusion, I've said to several people we've started, we started this work in many ways, a long time ago. When I think about equity in particular...there was a lot of tracking and acceleration [referring to when she started in the district] and it was what I would consider to be a pretty traditional [educational] model.

Another district leader described how schools need to change tracking and acceleration systems by thinking differently about practices related to course selection and access. More specifically, Superintendent Williams highlighted work that centers on creating opportunities for student choice.

Superintendent Williams stated:

Actually, there is a tremendous amount of latitude here with students being able to select the courses that they want to take, however, when you do look at our AP enrollment data, you'll see that there is still, it's still disproportionate. Asian and white students disproportionately enrolled in those courses. So, to me it does go back to the growth mindset and push to allow kids to have an opportunity to pick the courses that they want to take. I think they're self-selecting out [of courses]. I think it's a deeper understanding of why is that happening like, why are they preprogrammed to think that they should not take an honors class or an AP class? How do we disrupt that and then, when you talk to the kids about what they're learning in classrooms, is it still an end game goal...they are looking to achieve high grades. So, the vast majority of students with high grades get it, so they get into college and keep moving forward. It's not about the competencies, except in the performance-based classes, I think, in our pre-engineering classes and our arts classes and our tech and a few other handfuls of other classes. It is still outcome, grade

driven, and so I think if you really could engage kids around, you know what is it that they want to learn or be better in I think you will increase the engagement and increase that opportunity. I think that is a sort of putting the system on its head.

In summary, these data suggest limited ways that district leaders say they lead change in examining and addressing tracking and acceleration by thinking differently about structures, systems, and processes. These data also suggest that addressing tracking and acceleration requires thinking differently about what our data says about our students and their needs, in addition to their own desires and access to various courses and opportunities. It advocates allowing more choice for students – essentially flipping our current traditional system upside down to engage students. From the leaders’ perspectives, creating career pathways and personalized learning options is one structural and procedural approach they say they utilize to open opportunities and create flexibility for students. The practice places a primary focus of this action on the individual student – a personalized learning approach or pathway geared toward meeting individual student needs. Understanding the approach presented by district leaders, centered on a clear vision, can result in a positive experience including restructured programs and redefined curriculums when implemented. That being stated, this strategy or approach also generates more questions as to whether pathways and personalized learning maintains tracking systems if students are unable to get to the same entry point prior to making decisions about which learning pathway they wish to experience. Furthermore, when the primary responsibility associated with personalized learning is placed on students, leaders and other educators reinforce systemic issues of inequity. They essentially place blame for success or lack thereof, as well as the end result on one person – the student. This action is consistent to a blame the victim mentality and allows for unequal and inequitable systems to exist. Last of all, if students do not

have the confidence or the support of instructional staff members to challenge themselves, they are less likely to pursue personalized learning pathways that include taking advanced level courses and curriculums. In the next sections, the analysis examines how district leaders understand resistance to change regarding tracking and acceleration systems and how they address the identified resistance.

### **Resistance to Change**

All of the district leaders shared that they encounter pressures, influences, and barriers when thinking about and navigating tracking and acceleration systems. These encounters all create resistance to change and impact how what they think and do about tracking and acceleration systems within their districts / schools. Prior literature on tracking and acceleration alone, all of which is organized within chapter 2 of this study, highlights the complex nature of tracking and why reform efforts are often confronted and challenged. More specifically, I argue resistance around tracking and acceleration takes shape in a variety of forms due to the complex nature, as well as the political, normative and technical dimensions of tracking reform.

The most common form of resistance associated with tracking and acceleration centers on policy, regulatory, and/or structurally created barriers like teacher recommendation criteria, behavior / discipline expectations, or in the form of prerequisite requirements / standards to engage in course curriculums and programs (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). Resistance also takes the form of parent / community attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs about what is best for students, more specifically their own children. Unquestionably, the resistance most associated to parents and community members stems from traditional thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of tracking and acceleration, all of which are connected to deep seeded norms. All of these conditions create resistance.

Additionally, when educational stakeholders hold differing visions, missions, and goals for student learning, the lack of shared ideologies creates conditions consistent with a perfect storm – a lack of synergy and shared commitments for supporting the success of all students. Lastly, resistance to change associated with tracking and acceleration can take the form of a lack of knowledge and/or understanding regarding the negative and inequitable impact of practices on all students’ growth and learning.

The next section navigates how this study’s district leaders think about the resistance to change to tracking and acceleration systems, as well as how they plan to address the resistance or what they say they are doing to address the resistance to change. Additionally, as highlighted throughout this findings chapter, I contend that the district leaders’ actions are all minimal and represent little movement to disrupt tracking.

### **Addressing Resistance**

Addressing resistance to change within schools is a complex, challenging, time consuming, collaborative, and interactive process. It requires thoughtful planning, consideration, and visioning in order to shift perspectives, and encourage stakeholders to move beyond the status quo. In this section, focused on addressing resistance to change to tracking and acceleration systems, the district leaders describe efforts to counter resistance by 1) eliminating barriers (teacher recommendation process and behavior / discipline decisions and prerequisites); 2) countering parent and community perspectives and beliefs (shifting mindsets); 3) empowering committed staff; 4) centering work on strategic goals and plans; and 5) providing professional learning (building shared knowledge with stakeholders). These themes and strategies highlight how leaders attempt to address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools.



## ***Eliminating Barriers***

Eliminating barriers to course offerings is an area that most often creates resistance to change. All of the leaders described, in some capacity, efforts they or their district and building leaders have taken to eliminate barriers that prevent access to certain courses, many of which are related to advanced placement, college-level, or accelerated courses. More specifically the district leaders address the resistance to change through the examination of teacher recommendations and behavior/discipline and prerequisite expectations.

**Teacher Recommendation Process.** Teacher recommendations have been a long-standing barrier to access into accelerated and high-level or tracked academic courses. As highlighted by Superintendent Williams, “The teacher recommendation process is a huge one [to barrier]. You know the fact that teachers are sometimes barriers to access.” Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard identifies teacher recommendation as contributing and most influential barrier to course access and opportunity for students. Lassard stated:

Maybe a standardized test and maybe your grades. It may be teacher recommendation.

For us it's probably the same for a lot of schools... Based on several criteria with teacher recommendations being most influential.

Interestingly enough, some superintendents shared that they do not actually know their district's process or selection criteria for acceleration, but conjectures that teacher recommendations were likely included. Superintendent Fulton stated:

I'm actually not as familiar with it, I think, just given our size. What I believe probably weighs a lot is teacher recommendation. I would hope it involves artifacts that include formative assessment to be able to gauge a student's readiness or, especially if it's a

prerequisite course. Again, there is always that data, the sciences, which comes first, but there's certain knowledge that needs to be applied.

Superintendent Fulton continued with justification of not understanding the process. Fulton stated:

As a quality of leadership, you're expected to delegate and yet you're expected to know that every detail of it. Well, if I'm delegating, why should I know every detail of it? But you have to know.

While delegation and trust of other district and building leaders is important in many aspects of leadership, it is essential to fully understand to address resistance to change to barriers of access and opportunity.

Director of Curriculum and Instruction Pope detailed how teacher recommendations coupled with other factors are requirements or gatekeepers to course access and opportunity.

Pope highlighted:

We say, if you're interested, please fill this form out and bring it back to school. What we do from there is we then take a look at the students and that's where we'll start to bring in the data. We will do like a pre-assessment. We will look at diagnostic information. We will look at class grades, and we still take obviously teacher recommendation. And, it's ultimately you know, taking those pieces together. The parents want the students in the course or the student wants to be in the course and the teachers recommend them. Those are the students that go into the program.

Most significantly, Superintendent Weagraff highlights the need for eliminating barriers like teacher recommendations because of equitable access to accelerated or advanced programming.

Weagraff said:

You know what has been done, how it's been done. We are really identifying what could we, what can we learn from change. As I mentioned, the teachers in many cases utilize the recommendation process kind of the way it's always been done and for whatever reason, whether they have a bias to students who come from poor backgrounds, or with students who come from a mixed race or family who happened to be black students there seem to be significant inconsistency or in equity among all students having access -- not necessarily an equal access but no access to those programs. We just really wanted to identify the following: Do we have a policy? Do we have practices? Do we have regulations in place that inhibit our ability to change that the reality?

While this data is very telling on one aspect to eliminating barriers to tracking and acceleration, the next section focuses on behavior and discipline decisions, along with prerequisites preventing students from accessing courses reinforcing tracking and accelerated systems.

**Behavior / Discipline Decisions and Prerequisites.** Making student placement decisions based on student behavior and discipline, as well as success on prerequisite skills, success, and performance have been other long-standing barriers to access into accelerated and high-level or tracked academic courses. Like many of the district leaders, Assistant Superintendent Maxwell described a system of access limited by unequal access because of test scores and compliance to norms expected of “compliant and well-behaved students. Maxwell said:

Norm referencing tests to see who could qualify, none of that stuff was going on. It [placing students] was really was not done fairly or equally. Not every kid had an opportunity. It was difficult to make the cases, have the conversation in a public forum, and ultimately explaining my position or my recommendation to the superintendent why I

was recommending we dissolve that practice. At the same time, I knew it was the right thing to do, because then it gave us, you know, instead of having dedicated teachers for just talented and gifted kids, it gave all kids access to those same teachers. We were able to reduce class sizes because we put teachers back in the classroom instead of working with four or five or six kids. It was the right thing to do! That was a tip, but we stayed the course. We have certain beliefs on our strategic plan that we believe in our instruction and every individual's ability to succeed. Every child should be given the opportunity to challenge anything. I am paraphrasing the beliefs, but I mean, that is right in the belief statements. Well if that is true, then that is why we are here.

Again, while the data provides a context and a means for change as it relates to eliminating artificial barriers to tracking and acceleration like prerequisites, the next section focuses on parent and community perspectives and beliefs challenge and reinforce limiting accessing to courses which reinforcing tracking and accelerated systems.

### ***A Need to Shift Parent / Community Mindsets, Perspective, and Beliefs***

Parent and community member perspective and beliefs to course offerings, student experiences, and academic outcomes is an area that most often creates resistance to change. All of the leaders within this study described, how influential members of their school communities are when it comes to communication regarding access to certain courses, many of which are related to advanced placement, college-level, or accelerated courses. More specifically in this section, I highlight how district leaders view resistance to change through the parents and community members.

Superintendent Fulton highlights the importance of communication because parents and community members hold expectation of students' programming based on their own school experiences and beliefs about what is best for their student. Fulton shared:

I can tell you its expectations sometimes of parents or our prior beliefs. I think it is also education on our part and communication and information. There are times I have run into parents and they say, I wish I had known that I couldn't have gotten into a program like Project Lead the Way with engineering. They thought they needed to take these prerequisites in eighth and ninth grade that would have gotten the student to that point. If a student is very interested in being an engineer, and he would have loved to have started some things earlier, but it [course sequences and pathways] kind of set the course of pattern, and if we don't do a good enough job articulating opportunities and options early enough then that really limits [students].

Fulton clearly showcases how good and purposeful communication can create opportunities for students and shift, in some capacity how stakeholders view certain opportunities and options for students. Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlights the importance of communication with families and students about programming, philosophy, as well as the pros and cons of placement in courses, pathways, or specific program. Lassard stated:

They're going to put them, they're going to place them in one class or a few sections, then what does that look like, for others? I do think what are the key parts of the conversation is explaining what our programs look like, and it really goes back to the question of what is our philosophy. I do not believe in middle school, we should be creating too many opportunities to separate kids out. I still think it is experiential. Kids should have opportunity to do lots of things. Classrooms should be heterogeneous. But, one of the

byproducts or unintended consequence of the Regents [program and acceleration] says some kids are wanting to start taking Regents in eighth grade, and then it moves forward. Clear communication provides a context and a means for addressing resistance to change as it relates to shifting parents, families, students, and the community perceptions regarding tracking and acceleration. As such, all of the leaders shared stories of how they faced resistance in leading change related to de-tracking and/or acceleration practices and the desire to shift mindsets of their stakeholders. The leaders discussed how resistance due to staff or teacher mindset is a contributing factor that prevent progress and change.

To begin, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dube' highlighted the struggle leaders encounter. Dube' stated:

The challenge of having a common understanding or building consensus oftentimes it is about mindsets. Shifting mindsets are about educating people that have a false understanding or misunderstanding about a particular thing, such as tracking, as well as the value that they believe it may have or that at least, it was purported to have from the past. The biggest hurdle we face is moving beyond what we have always done and continue to do.

Similarly, Superintendent Allen stated:

It is amazing because the first words that came to my mind are mindsets...Clearly one of the challenges would be [shifting] the mindsets and it could be with any stakeholder group that we are dealing with. It may be in the parental stakeholder group, it may be in the educator, teacher, or administrator stakeholder groups. It could be in the students.

Clearly district leaders know and understand the power behind being able to educate and shift the thinking and mindsets of stakeholder. Consequently, with that understanding of influence, the

leaders also recognized the complexity of change when stakeholders are satisfied with the status quo. This is particularly important when it comes to moving beyond tracking and acceleration because of the benefits to some at the expense of others.

Assistant Superintendent Lassard provided an example which highlighted how not all can be considered black and white when it comes to policies, practices, and procedures related to student placement and course options. In this example, Lassard described the need to shift staff and Board of Education mindsets in order to change policy and practices for the benefit of students. Lassard indicated:

We had to allow a unique situation where the students been in the district, all the way through. He is a seventh grader. He's a very talented actor. So, he got invited to do a program on Broadway and he's going to be out of school for 13 weeks. He has a tutor. He's rehearsing all day. He worked with a tutor in the late afternoon early evening. And, the reality is, because it's not considered an educational event as defined by board policy, the question is, is this an excuse absence or unexcused absences? If it's unexcused, do we require teachers to send work every day? Because technically he's not in school, we kind of got into it [with teachers regarding appropriateness of options], we kind of made a compromise...some of our staff are very frustrated saying, 'Hey, this is a lot to ask of us for a child who's choosing not to be in school to pursue something else.' This is a good point, so we're going to go back -- it's at our policy conversation for next week. We will be looking at our attendance policy and what is the right thing to do for kids who are pursuing something that, in my view, is healthy -- it's educational! You're actively doing something that's important to them and asking how do we create some flexibility? Maybe it's to say if you're going to be out for more than 20 weeks we have to look at a

different option. I don't know, but I do think it goes back to board policy and if we have those good conversations that builds the foundation for changing practice and systems.

Using a more global example, Superintendent Allen highlighted the need to shift the mindsets of state education officials so that schools and districts could be more flexible and creative with creating experiences, course offerings, pathways, and opportunities for students. Allen specified:

The bureaucracy of state education regulations is such that quite often the innovations are there and moving forward, but the systems and the structures or the other ways in which one must demonstrate what they need to in order to graduate have not been as flexible as they need to be to allow for the newer systems and structures, such as early college high school or P-tech or whatever it might be that might move a student forward in a career or college pathway, and yet we need also those other, you know, and you have to cross this 't' or dot this 'i' or whatever, in order to graduate. I mean, I think that those are the things that we, we can be very challenged by.

Assistant Superintendent Samuels detailed how building leaders and their mindsets play a significant role in creating experiences, what actually is constructed as part of the master schedule of courses and offerings. Samuels stated:

So, I think that the bones in the design principles of the master scheduling process at the high school specifically are exactly an asset to work with in order to move all of this work forward. I think when we think about the individuals who are then a part of that, and have, or may have, to your words, influence, within the outcomes of what that looks like that's the part where you have to kind of wonder about implicit bias or low expectations or deficit thinking when it comes to all the rest of those components. The



fact that ultimately the design principle is student interest that is huge, huge, huge when I think about it from teacher recommendation to then student request. There is a little level there that sort of says what is the student hearing before they go and make this request to the counselor.

From a different perspective, Assistant Superintendent Maxwell identified vision, beliefs, systemwide philosophies, and advocacy as contributing influences to shifting mindsets and thinking to counter resistance to change related to tracking and acceleration. Maxwell stated:

A student can go to the counselor and say, ‘I want to challenge that request and actually go in.’ They say, ‘Hey, Mr. Smith [referring to the counselor] I think I want to push myself here. Are we instilling those things in there intentionally and are we giving kids that benefit of the doubt to sort of, say, ‘I want to push myself!’ and that, I think, are questions on the individual level, but then I think the other component is a long general expectation system wide. Do we have an expectation that all students should have or should leave with some either AP or dual enrollment course? If we think that is that important to leave [with that credential / experience] then we think that all students will do that. Seniors should have that experience by the time they exit through here. So, they have a taste of what it looks like to work at a college level. You could also apply that to internships or something else, but I think that's the other kind of component to think about.

Lastly, and most interestingly, Superintendent Skinner shared sentiments related to the power of motivation and challenge in messaging as a way to shift staff, community, and student mindsets. Skinner stated:

So, we've talked a lot about that and how we're not dream killers. We're here to help kids take the highest challenge possible. I could talk about the other end of the spectrum too. I mean, we, we have some pretty significantly challenged students here and our goal long before it was popular, long before I got here was inclusion. You know, we were a pretty included school before it was popular or sexy. And, um, you know, we continue to be, and I'm pretty proud of that because I think those kids get a rich experience. Um, even if they're not capable of doing most of what's happening in there, they're exposed and, and the other kids are exposed to them, you know? So, they're starting to realize that people are different and we can appreciate differences.

Again, the data highlights the need for leaders to shift mindsets, as well as the positive effects of this action on addressing change to tracking and acceleration systems in middle and high schools. The next section focuses on empowering committed staff to counteract resistance to change to academic tracking and acceleration.

### ***Empowering Committed Staff***

Empowering committed staff is one way to leverage resistance to change associated with differing visions, missions, and goals for student learning, as well as a lack of knowledge and/or understanding regarding the negative and inequitable impact of tracking and acceleration practices. That stated, during interviews with district leaders, all of the leaders described, in some capacity, how influential committed staff members are to advancing initiatives and change within their schools. More specifically, some of the leaders referenced, as pointed out in prior sections of this chapter how other staff begin to “fall like dominoes” once they see the positive or beneficial effects of the change. As such, it is important for leaders examining change to tracking

and acceleration systems to establish a cadre of committed staff to move change forward and shift mindsets to benefit all students.

### ***Centering Work on Strategic Goals / Plans***

Creating or centering work around strategic goals and plans is one strategy district leaders use to counter resistance to change associated with differing visions, missions, and goals. Most of the leaders within this study described how strategic vision and goals provides a framework to refer to when stakeholders, staff, parents, and community members, resist change to tracking and acceleration systems. More specifically in this section, I highlight how district leaders use strategic goals and plans to address resistance.

Superintendent Williams described how using the strategic plan provides a guidepost for initiatives and change. Williams stated:

I didn't want everybody to be reactive, because then, all of a sudden, we'd be doing things without purpose and so really, we took the time to listen and through those listening sessions, it became very clear that we needed to coalesce into a set of goals and objectives, and planning for the district. As a result of that, we hired a consulting firm to come in and help us with setting a strategic plan. And, so now, as a result of that strategic plan, one of the main initiatives, is our grounding work with diversity equity and inclusion. So now we are, you know, for the first couple years we were, for the first year we were really rolling along, and now we're starting to feel just a little bit of resistance to that initiative and some specific things within that initiative. I find it difficult, but we need to continue to push, we need to continue to keep the foot on the accelerator. I feel comfortable doing that primarily because again I am enacting and moving forward on a set of goals that were created, with input from a wide variety of stakeholders. So, when

things are getting a little bumpy with a couple of different things, it's this third-party document, it's our strategic plan, that keeps us moving forward. This is not necessarily about me. It's about us and it's about what's right for the district and about what what's right for kids – all kids. So, leaning on that sort of third-party, that third data point, our strategic plan, has helped to give me the, I'm not sure what the right word is – the strength. It's the rationale when people question what we're doing and I go back to the why. That's what we find ourselves continually going back to – the why. It's housed in the data that we used to create the strategic plan.

Similarly, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dube' detailed how another district uses stakeholders to provide focus and direction for the district, individual school buildings, staff members, and students. Dube' detailed:

You can highlight the key first as all change is a process. Often, a process, I guess if you run into something that is conflicting, it very well could be an argument for the 'It just needs to happen because it's the right thing to do!' It's what the research says.

Sometimes, then, then you just make that change. You need to make happen it happened, but, but we know also that it's important to build a knowledge – to educate because it's about, you know, at our district, what we try to do through the strategic planning processes that it's about facilitating conversations – it's about collaborating with our thoughts and our ideas and the work that we do together. It's all about getting input from all the key stakeholders through our strategic planning. We have surveys. We have big picture meetings. We have tried to get the data that would highlight areas in need of improvement or in this case areas needing change. It's interesting that if you look at the data and if the survey questions are framed in the right way you'll see people identify an

area that is needed improvement could be under equity – could be under DEI [Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion]. In general, it's not one of those things that just comes out. It doesn't strike you as being this is an area [referring to course tracking] our key stakeholders see that needs to improve. But, then, once we do that [implement change to course options] I think our plan to study and process is a great way of evaluating progress, monitoring, and seeing if the changes are positive and impactful. It's constantly reassessing our efforts and getting us to where we want to be. It's a process, and I think we have a strong structure in place with the strategic plan.

### ***Providing Professional Learning / Building Shared Knowledge***

Providing professional learning or staff development and building shared knowledge is one way to leverage resistance to change associated with a lack of knowledge and/or understanding regarding the negative and inequitable impact of tracking and acceleration practices. Quite simply, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' stated, "I think it is about educating all of our folks!" Assistant Superintendent Lassard expanded on the simplicity of Dube's statement by recognizing the importance of working strategically to provide and support training for administrators, teachers, leaders, and other stakeholders in an effort to build a shared understanding and knowledgebase. Lassard stated:

It needs to be public, and it needs to be something that we all are going to be pushing for. The other part is educating our own administrators, our board members. We're working through the same training and PD [professional development]. I believe you are also doing the same with the Syracuse University project. We're starting with a very small group of people, and then we're going to expand our group as we go forward.

Assistant Superintendent Lampman detailed the importance of engaging collectively with learning to address resistance. Lampman shared:

Engaging with an initiative when it comes to educating staff, communicating expectations, you get the sense that it has to be worthy and that it can be done. It has to be done well, not necessarily easily, but that it can be done with the right team and the right vision and mission. You can get through that real work and change.

Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlights the importance of knowing the needs of staff to challenge and address resistance. Lassard stated:

Do we need additional training? Do we need additional staffing? Do we need to look at where this is being offered and delivered? Do we need to look at moving some staff around to better support the kids? Those are important conversations, because once you see the data, you gotta do something about it. I've often said, 'Either we're accepting the reality for what it is, which means we're okay with it, and we're endorsing it or we're challenging it and trying for something better', and when you put those two options on the table, people say, 'Yes, we gotta do better. Help us!'

Examining the data, providing support, and engaging in knowledge building are all examples of how Lassard navigates change within his system. Superintendent Weagraff identified the importance of including curriculum experts and leaders in conversations and trainings associated with change and resistance. Weagraff stated:

It is important to work with our curriculum folks because, you know, what are we doing in the buildings will have an impact on professional development, for instance.

Expanding upon the need to train staff to support changes to tracking and acceleration systems, Superintendent Fanton highlighted the desire to help teachers understand instructional

differentiation. When staff have strategies and skills in their toolbox to effectively instruct students, schools more effectively support student learning. Fanton stated:

Well, you know Danielson [referring to Charlotte Danielson, educator and internationally-recognized expert in the area of teacher effectiveness] talked about a three by three model of differentiation. It is possible we can sharpen our tool on tier one instruction and if we do that correctly where we are allowing students to understand and make decisions then it would happen as part of that interest readiness. You know the components of the learner profile would inform decision and you wouldn't be tracking a student. You would be helping support where they're at with any given learning experience. So, I think its kind of sticking with what we know is true, but also continuing to provide the training on how to do that because we don't practice what we think is best practice.

Fanton's position amplifies the need for district leaders, as well as building administrators and teachers to practice what they preach. Furthermore, training, professional learning, and creating opportunities to building shared knowledge are all necessary components to leverage resistance to change associated with student learning, and more importantly counteract tracking and acceleration practices and systems.

In summary, this data suggests that addressing resistance to change within schools is a complex, challenging, time consuming. It suggests that strategies for change must be collaborative and interactive. As described, within this section, resistance to change requires thoughtful planning, consideration, and visioning in order to shift perspectives, and encourage stakeholders to move beyond the status quo. Addressing resistance to change to tracking and acceleration systems, by eliminating barriers (teacher recommendation process and behavior /

discipline decisions and prerequisites), countering parent and community perspectives and beliefs (shifting mindsets), empowering committed staff, centering work on strategic goals and plans, and providing professional learning (building shared knowledge with stakeholders) are necessary actions that likely could result in equitable change within districts and schools. Ultimately, the actions and proposed shifts are small in scope; however, highlight many of the ways district leaders attempt to address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of how district leaders address issues of tracking and acceleration. More specifically, this data focused on what leaders say they do about tracking and acceleration, described what they say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts, as well as describe their attempts to dismantle tracking and address the race, gender, class, and ability hierarchies within course tracking and acceleration systems. Additionally, this chapter explored what leaders say they are doing and thinking to disrupt tracking and acceleration through the conceptual framework constructed using Oakes (1986, 1992, 2005, and 2008) dimension of tracking framework and Radd et al.'s (2021) lens of equity focused leadership.

In sum, the following represents the major findings (what we know) from this data chapter:

- Leaders have good intentions, but little is done to disrupt tracking within the districts / schools
- What district leaders are thinking and doing about tracking and acceleration result in small or minimal actions, strategies, and/or changes that do not result in transformative, sustained, and systemic change within their districts / schools.



- The resistance to change associated with tracking and acceleration systems is overpowering the small actions and efforts described by the district leaders as strategies and important functions of addressing resistance to change.

To provide an additional foundation for the final findings (data) chapter about how regional influences and pressure influence decision-making and change efforts around tracking and acceleration, I highlight and reinforce two important realities as a result of the data presented in chapter 4 and chapter 5: oppressive patterns regarding student placement in courses and programming are allowed to exist with the districts / schools and little is done to disrupt tracking. To that end, the final chapter will focus on capitalizing on regional influence and pressure, as well as collaborating to maximize equity around tracking and acceleration. In the final data chapter, I address the following research question: How do regional influences and pressures impact decision-making and change efforts?

## CHAPTER 6

### **Findings on regional influence, pressure, decision-making, and change**

*"Ego is probably one of the biggest poisons we can have — it's toxic to any environment."*  
- Jonny Kim (2020)

A focus of this research study is to better understand how district leaders navigate regional influences, pressures, decision-making, and change as they address tracking and acceleration. This chapter examines the third research question: How do regional influences and pressures impact decision-making and change efforts? As such, participants in this study discuss how influence and pressure affects their actions related to change, how regional actions and decisions from other leaders influences change, as well as explores how regional efforts could be used to address course tracking and acceleration systems. Additionally, this chapter sets the stage for the final chapter of this dissertation study by positioning the argument that regional work is necessary to successfully address tracking and accelerations systems in middle and high schools.

#### **Influence and Pressure**

The district leaders all described how influence and pressure can affect decision-making and change efforts. Based on prior research associated to tracking, and acceleration, all of which I highlight within Chapter 2 of this dissertation study, my participants described influence and pressure when examining tracking and acceleration through the lens of various stakeholder groups. More specifically, I use community / families, teacher / staff, and school boards to categorize how influence and pressure impact decision-making and change for the district leaders.

While the focus of my analysis centers on navigating influence and pressure from the regional perspective, I first highlight influence and pressure from a more global position affecting all decisions and change efforts within PK-12 schools. To begin, Superintendent Allen described high-level district leaders and the specific role of district leadership as influence. She explained:

Influence, I believe, is what leadership is. I think it is for us [district leaders] to be demonstrating that we are influencing the educational system to move in a direction that meets the needs of each and every student in order to meet the needs of all students.

Clearly this sentiment from veteran Superintendent Allen showcases the role of district-level leaders like Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents in shaping and influencing the implementation of a school district's vision and mission through educational programming, structures, systems, and opportunities for the students and communities the leaders serve.

Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Samuels pointed to influence as a key factor in how district-level leaders navigate their roles. He stated, "Influence is about how you sort of navigate the role different individuals [referring district and building leaders] have in making change." While collectively all of the leaders agreed that influence impacts how they go about change, only 4 of the 6 Superintendents and 5 of the 6 Assistant Superintendents / Curriculum Directors openly acknowledged that the actions of other leaders and districts influence how they view and embark on change. Superintendent Williams shared that leaders always have room for growth and improvement and that other leaders influence that growth. Williams stated, "I know [referring to actions of other leaders and districts] again, I think that yeah it influences. There is always multiple areas of growth."

Furthermore, pressure from a variety of sources and influences also affects how leaders think about change around tracking, acceleration, and course programming within their school districts and school communities. Superintendent Williams shared:

I think it's fascinating the pressure that we [leaders] feel on how we respond to that [referring to equity surrounding tracking and acceleration] and I think that diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the way the state is handling the sort of focus on equity and access is really admirable in that they've said, you know, we need to be addressing this so that all kids can be successful, whether they be black, brown, poor, special, whatever those groups are, we need to be thinking more deliberately about that and we need to be acting thoughtfully and meaningfully towards that focus. They've [the New York State Education Department] set some targets or some focus areas that we may want to think about doing but they've not set a pathway. I think that is critically important. That really honors the fact that all of our school districts and our localities are in fact different. The end target, I think, is common, but the way that we are going to get there is very different.

Superintendent Williams's words, showcase what all of the district leaders shared in that they all recognize, not only a need for change but a desire for change. They recognize the pressures and influences associated with change to tracking and acceleration systems, as well as all the other instructional and programming inequities. While thoughtful and meaningful action is acknowledged, an appreciation for flexibility and difference to meet the needs of their individual school communities is evident. Certainly, it is apparent that the leaders can say the right things, but can their words turn to action? Are they committed to addressing change to tracking and accelerations systems? To answer these questions, I refer back to the data highlighted in chapter

4 which suggests that tracking exists within all of the leaders' schools. As such, it is clear that the leaders' words do not result in much action around tracking and acceleration within their school districts.

Providing a slightly different context for pressure, Superintendent Fanton described how competition and collaboration play into pressure. This positive outlook provides a viewpoint of pressure from a rather growth mindset as opposed to a deficit focused perspective.

Superintendent Fanton outlined:

We have some fun competing on the field -- that's a fun little competition, you know, but otherwise we are not in competition [in the classroom] -- It's about best practices! We want our staff to be talking with each other and learning. I did this in my classroom [referring to when he taught] -- I never thought of that [pressure to compete against others]. We are never as good as we need to be. We need to be better at learning from each other, as well -- not in competition! So, to go back, I don't feel, I mean, there's a pressure [to keep up with other districts and schools], but it's a good kind of pressure.

Shifting back to influence and learning from the successes of other leaders and districts, Superintendent Fanton highlighted how influence and pressure leads to change if leaders are willing to learn from others. Superintendent Fanton continued:

If it is best practice -- If there is another school district doing something that works, I absolutely want to know about it. I am not too proud to say 'Yeah we'll steal from that!' and, hopefully, if we are doing this right at some point we are doing something that somebody else says, 'Hey, can you tell us more about that?' But you know, especially this past year, it's been...so this district is doing that and you're not doing that, and, and that is where we will say 'hold on' there's a bit of a different construct as to why we can't,

but relative to pressures and outside forces, I just think more and more, this is happening.

I'm always getting some ideas [from other leaders] or writing them down.

Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlighted how learning, growth, and regional approaches can lead to success through change efforts. Assistant Superintendent Lassard stated:

I think we learn from each other. I think a regional approach would make sense because, as you know, we all know that we're all often compared to one another. If there is something one of our neighboring districts are doing that we're not, we hear about it! If there is something we are doing, they hear about it! You know, we all kind of rise together, and I think it's a common problem from what I can tell the common challenge, I should say, and if we all have, you know, if we have a resource or way to connect with one another and share ideas, resources, policies, procedures, I think it would be helpful.

Expanding on the idea that regional approaches provide a solution to influences, pressures, and the negative components to change, Superintendent Fulton described the power of regional efforts to the assumption they can be associated with increased academic performance while countering traditional practices, policies, procedure, and structures consistent with the status quo. Fulton indicated:

I like a regional approach, because it doesn't pit one district against another, and we always aspire to be at the highest level, and if there's some districts, and I'll just use a local district, for instance, that either their test scores are always at a certain level that we aspire, then if we used a regional approach and everybody was doing some of the same things, it would seem to make sense to me that we would all improve. If you did not do a regional approach we would be where we are at now and you kind of succumb to just traditional established things within our districts without pushing the envelope.

While all of the district leaders express the desire to learn and lead instructional change by working collaboratively with other regional leaders, they are unable to elaborate with examples of their work beyond collaborations and engagements surrounding health and safety preparedness due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The inability of the leaders to produce exemplars of instructional collaborations and change brings to the forefront or raises the question as to whether this practice is actually occurring within districts. More specifically, the leaders genuinely express an interest and desire in learning and growing from other leaders, but their plans and good intentions for meaningful change are not actively happening within the current setting.

When asked whether regional influence, pressure, and decision-making impacts change, more specifically, how districts' decision would impact actions, Fulton went on to clarify the affect the decisions would have on advancing progress in the superintendent's own district. Superintendent Fulton said:

I think it would impact our decisions, especially if they're a high performing district, I think it would be a clear example as to the benefits and to why we should do that, because if you don't track and they're high performing, you're going to bring up everybody. I like that, but again, sometimes people want to stay with the status quo, but as a region, if everybody is doing it, it is tough to fight that effort.

Clearly Fulton highlights the stance that collective efforts of many districts working together to address the status quo associated with tracking and acceleration can result with positive change. As such, the questioning of tracking and the desire for improvement are being questioned and contemplated because the district leader knows it is the right thing to do, but appears puzzled on how to address the change without the collective efforts and collaboration of many. This

showcases the position that regional efforts are necessary for change, as well as the power of influence and pressure the leaders experience from district to district.

Assistant Superintendent Lassard centers his thoughts and wonderings surrounding acceleration and tracking by emphasizing the need for collaborative work and knowledge sharing. Lassard stated:

I think it is interesting to see how other districts are managing or handling acceleration and tracking. If we can create more opportunities, and I think we are at a time where there is a little bit of a sea change where there are more people talking about it, and, you know, thinking more clearly about equity and opportunities.

While Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlights influence and pressure leading to collaborative work, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' shared a more cautioned approach to getting on board with regional efforts. Dube' described an openness to work together, but how his district's high-level leadership team is slow to immediately jump on board to regional efforts because of influence or pressure. Dube' shared:

Well, I guess what would that do for us, for myself, and my position, my role or whatever, I mean, I would like to believe that we are a district that does evidence based best practices and truly makes those decisions [of acceleration and course selections] based on what are best practices. I would think that we are also innovative and open enough to explore other possibilities and ideas collectively. But, it's about having conversations. It is about involving our stakeholders and it is truly about what is right. It would not just be because somebody else is doing it because they say that this is the right thing to do. We would not be ones that jumped right on board – that is not the way we roll!



Not surprising, Dube's Superintendent of schools responded with a similar cautioned and reserved approach to regional influence and pressure. Superintendent Allen detailed:

I wholeheartedly concur with Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' and I think we actually say aloud to our community that we compare our growth each year to our previous growth. We specifically are not comparing ourselves necessarily to another entity, having said that, if another entity is learning something that we could gain from we would certainly be more than willing to learn from other districts. I do, all the time, really tap into someone else who may have taken the lead in a certain area that we can learn from. Although, we wouldn't feel, a peer pressure to duplicate someone else's work, nor do we ever promote ourselves that someone should duplicate what we're replicating what we're doing. We really want to best meet the needs of each and every student and then meet the needs of all students...to do it in a way that allows students to progress, you know, in a continuum with the support that's needed, and to certainly accelerate as Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' explained earlier.

Superintendent Allen's focus on what is best for the district's students based on the district's own internal and external influences and pressures to see growth and improvement is centered on students as key stakeholders. Students taking center stage was described in an interesting way by Superintendent Skinner. Skinner shared thoughts on influence which appeared very student centered, as opposed to adult or educator focused. Superintendent Skinner specified:

In general, I did not think about influence the way my colleague used it – I think about how are we influencing – How are we influencing kids? How are we influencing their future? How are we messaging? You know, like messaging as a way of influence. Are we messaging to kids to take a challenge? Are we influencing them in a way that elevates

them to take a challenge, or to desire, the challenge? Are we influencing them by saying I don't think this is right for you? We have talked a lot about this in the last six years. We are not the dream killers! So, for me, I think tracking and acceleration unintentionally, you know, if you're not watching what does the gateway to those two possibilities look like and who's excluded and who's included, if you don't pay attention to, I think you create a system that's negative. I think if you pay attention to the gateway and who can have access and how they gain access, you are creating something powerful for the kids that take advantage of it. That's a lot of what we've been trying to do is break down the closed doors and break down the barriers and also try to tap in a little bit more closely to what path a kid wants to take, and how we can influence that path by the way we encourage or discourage a student. I mean we hold a lot of influence over kids. I mean we're in a position of authority, but also of respect and you know we [leaders] are aware of the power of that influence, and how we are using it.

Thinking about how influence is negotiated by leaders to make decisions that are in the best interest of students further describes the significance on power associated with leadership. As described, the district leaders shared their personal beliefs, thoughts, and ideas around influence, pressure, and how regional decisions and actions impact their views on advancing programming and initiatives. While all of the leaders, for the most part, expressed support of working together and learning from each other, they struggled to provide multiple examples of how they collaborate to address the pressures. Their words and desires are certainly sincere, but mainly rhetoric as examples of action are limited. That being stated, one concrete example of action, collaboration, and working together highlighted by all of the superintendents centered on plans, response, and action associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This world-wide experience

necessitated these leaders to work together to manage their district's and communities. Collectively, each leader indicated they needed each other to survive and each leader's genuine acknowledgement of the productivity of their united efforts is evidence that continued collaboration and learning can lead to regional change. Ultimately, this sincere acknowledgement of action may be the first example of a shift in process that moves the district leaders from rhetoric to action. In the next sub section, I will share how leaders described community and family involvement as an area they feel influences and places pressures on themselves when making decisions and instituting change.

### ***Family / Community Influence & Pressure***

In this sub section, I use the thoughts from three of the district-level leaders to represent the various viewpoints expressed by all of the district leaders. The words of Superintendent Skinner, Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' and Assistant Superintendent Samuels shed light on community and family influence and pressure connected to decision-making, change, and regional action.

To begin, Assistant Superintendent Samuels hypothetically described how influence from parents and families comes about when a change to tracking and acceleration systems or other major instructional and/or curricular areas is considered in similar districts. Samuels shared:

For me, I think, and this is anecdotal after not as much time in this district, I feel like when somebody else goes out like that first [referring to making a change to acceleration or course offerings], and says we're going to make this change [referring to detracking] that necessarily doesn't influence our decision, but I think our stakeholders feel -- our teachers, our parents feel the pressure to want the same.

Interestingly, as described, the pressure from parents to want what students experience when changes are made in other districts is not as influential to this specific leader's decisions, thoughts, ideas, and actions when thinking about change, influence, and pressure. That stated, these words also represent another piece of evidence that sheds light on how things like issues of equity and access to tracking and acceleration systems do not necessarily change or get any better because of leaders' inability to act because of outside influences and pressures. Furthermore, expressing the desire to change with no action in conjunction with the resistance to change results in maintenance of the status quo.

Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' described how educating community and family is an important component to thinking about influence and pressure as they introduce change. Additionally, Dube' outlines the challenge created by stakeholder involvement like community partnerships when contemplating regional actions, initiatives, and decisions. Dube' shared:

Ideally, as Superintendent Allen said, we all have the same end in mind [referring to students getting what they need to be ready for college and/or career]. Ultimately, we are doing what is best for kids. But, I don't know if that's always everyone's understanding or it's about as we've talked, people being educated about education and understanding how things work and the purpose behind what we do versus what an outside entity does. We, not like all districts, have community partnerships and relationships that influence. So, I think there's a lot of varying stakeholders, as you say influences that and create a challenge to have a more regional commonality.

While Director Dube' and Superintendent Allen indicated "we all have the same end in mind" it is clear their sentiments require closer examination. As their words stand alone, one could argue

that working together and providing all students with what they need to meet with success is the end game for all socially just district and building leaders. At face value and aspirationally speaking, not many people can reason against those thoughts, ideas, and actions – they sound good; however, in context to change, influence, and pressure as described through their own words about families and communities, the true meaning of their confrontations is misleading. Not all stakeholders or district leaders “have the same end in mind!” For example, leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders think they know what is best for their students, but evidence from Chapter 4 clearly showcases that what they believe is best instructionally for students maintains the academic and accelerated tracked programming structures our society and educational systems have embraced for far too long. More specifically, the course enrollment data from Chapter 4 clearly highlights that students labeled as having a disability and students of color do not have access to advanced level courses like their counterparts. I propose that not all stakeholders and leaders agree with the Dube’ and Allen’s statements regarding the designated end game given all of the personal beliefs, biases, and perspectives held individually as well as by parents, community members, teachers, and other key stakeholders. This juxtaposition creates a resultant pressure and influence that all of the leaders described regarding change and decision-making. Ultimately, if leaders are able to work together and agree upon a common goal, schools and systems are more likely influenced for the good and equity focused change is possible.

Superintendent Skinner described the need to build upon what Director Dube’ said about educating the community and families by working together to dismantle old systems by “digging in deeply” to address barriers and access to courses. To provide context surrounding the statement made by Superintendent Skinner, it is important to know that her district opened

enrollment into high-level courses like college-level and Advanced Placement® for all students within the first few years of her superintendency in the school district. The shift in philosophy to open enrollment and access to challenge courses for all students within the district required a lot of communication, learning, and a shift to a growth producing mindset to counteract the negative influences and pressures from stakeholders. Superintendent Skinner said:

That being said, there were some glaring things that I saw right when I came here that, you know, leaning more into tracking – who has access to things and who doesn't and that work of just dismantling some of the walls around it, like giving different kids access to higher-level coursework and not putting barriers and in no way, for no reason, sort of being dream killers, and only letting certain people into the club. The work of just dismantling old systems has been ongoing, so I feel like, in some ways in my community, we've been digging in pretty deeply but there's lots more work to be done in terms of the onset of DEI and access [to courses].

Ultimately, the data proposes that district leaders do think deeply about community and family influence and pressure connected to decision-making, change, and regional action associated with tracking and acceleration – they see, sense, and feel a connection. Certainly, understanding how some district leaders respond to and push forward through community and family influence and pressure is important to addressing tracking and acceleration in middle and high schools. While leaders indirectly express being afraid of or placing fear on parents and community pressure to prolong the inequity of tracking and acceleration systems, others more subtly make small shifts to address access and opportunity. Ultimately, the majority of the work the study's leaders described, have said they accomplished, or have proposed to tracking and acceleration is limited. Certainly, the course enrollment data represented in Chapter 4 confirms a clear

maintenance of the status quo. I contend that the influence and pressures district leaders experience from families and community members results in very minimal actions being taken to address the inequities of tracking and acceleration systems. With that being called to the forefront, a regional commitment with bold action is necessary to produce equitable change. In the next section, I describe how teacher and staff influence and pressure effects the district leaders' decisions.

### ***Teacher / Staff Influence & Pressure***

In this sub section, I use the thoughts from six of the district-level leaders to describe the influence and pressure exerted toward tracking and acceleration decisions. First, I use statements from district leaders that characterize influence and pressure resulting in maintenance of status quo and I conclude this section by highlighting the words of one leader which represent influence and pressure as a positive step toward change.

Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' and Assistant Superintendent Maxwell quite simply share statements that represent how teachers influence student placement decisions as well as change efforts. Their words highlight the power teachers and other instructional staff members hold to influence and place pressure against change efforts to tracking and acceleration systems. Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' stated, "We have our own teachers that are part of the journey [referring to student scheduling, recommendation, and placement processes] that has a lot to do with that traditional way of thinking and it takes, it's such a challenge to shift [thinking and mindset]. Similarly, Assistant Superintendent Maxwell shared, "It was all about sixth grade teachers determining who was going into accelerated math in seventh grade, which then set kids up for algebra." While Maxwell's statement represents some promise by alluding to teachers influence as past tense, the realities of what currently exists within his school district

tells another story – teachers and their pressure remain influential in decisions related to student placements.

Director of Curriculum & Instruction Pope's words also represent the power teachers have to influence student decisions. Her words speak to a mindset that places onus on students which reinforces the power and influence of teachers. In context to having discussions with students about course options and performance, she stated:

Really the biggest piece, our advice, is that students need to learn how to be advocates for themselves and that they need to be able to reach out and talk to their teachers when they're struggling and need help or if they want to be move forward. They have to become advocates for themselves.

Assistant Superintendent Lampman also described how teachers influence and pressure decisions and outcomes for students. She detailed:

I do think that some of that [referring to grouping and making decisions about students] is how are our kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teachers deal with kids. I think there is a – I don't think it's intentional, but I think there is a certain aspect of teachers' influencing about where students should be and that the influencing impacts how kids feel about themselves. I also will say some of this is surrounded around parents who, I don't know, I have to imagine you experienced this in detail, but I it happens here. I remember it with both of my children when they entered elementary school. There was my older son, I didn't know enough about it [referring to placement], he just got selected [to an advance /enriched class / course]. He got put in a certain teacher's class as well...I do believe at this young age, all of this starts and that whole lot of people [teachers] are making assumptions about certain kids right from that early age. I think it starts with the



teacher and then whether they mean it or not those feelings and assumptions are being projected on to students.

It is evident that even well-intentioned teachers have influence which often reinforces the status quo as opposed to change efforts. Assistant Superintendent Lampman continued by describing influence from the narrative of teacher control over student placement decisions and how leadership must constantly communicate and engage staff to counterbalance that story to propose change:

I think, to some extent having conversations with teachers and I particularly think about like Advanced Placement courses so often what happens is, you have the same teachers teaching AP year after year and several years ago, probably when Superintendent Skinner came in, we made a purposeful shift to allowing anybody who wanted to take an AP course to take an AP course and we did have a bit of pushback from certain teachers because, of course, I think what happens in AP classes particularly, is teachers see it as, ‘Well if I am taking this kid who might not meet prior qualifications to be in an AP class it's going to be more work for me. I got to catch them up to speed. I’ve got to, you know go back and teach them some things that they didn't learn in the prior grade.’ So, I think for us it's been constant conversations with teachers about why would we not want every kid to experience an AP class, regardless of whether they challenge the final AP exam or not. It's that exposure to that rich content and more rigorous content than they might have gotten in a regular class.

In a different way, Superintendent Weagraff describes teacher influence and pressure using bias, personal beliefs, and perspectives. In a limited way, his statement describes how he attempts to

shift mindset and thinking by calling out a major problem or issue that people avoid discussing or acknowledging because of their own discomfort. Superintendent Weagraff stated:

I tried to help people understand. I think we've been pretty good with moving the needle a little bit with people understanding that we all have a bias, you know, when I look at a certain family, or if I look at a certain individual I may have some preconceived ideas or expectations about those people good or bad. I try to get people to capture the idea that we all come to the table with a variety of biases and it's important for us to look to see if that played a role, you know with limiting students. I will just give you a quick example – When I talked to some teachers, there are people who are put into a box because of either their skin color or their lack of family finances that limit their ability to be provided the same education. So just a conversation about the word bias is really going to open up a little bit clarity for some of our staff. You know what has been done, how it's been done. We are really identifying what could we, what can we learn from change. As I mentioned, the teachers in many cases utilize the recommendation process kind of the way it's always been done and for whatever reason, whether they have a bias to students who come from poor backgrounds, or with students who come from a mixed race or family who happened to be black students there seem to be significant inconsistency or in equity among all students having access -- not necessarily an equal access but no access to those programs.

While Superintendent Weagraff's words represent some hope based on his very matter of fact perspective on change and influence of staff, they acknowledge the power of teacher influence and pressure associated with course placements using recommendation processes. Weagraff's words highlight the interpersonal bias, perspective, and struggle leaders face as they navigate

historic, systemic, and institutional inequity issues. His words call attention to the fact that certain groups of students have access to courses, curriculums, and opportunities that others do not because of their skill sets and/or understanding of how to access certain programming. Moreover, his words also underscore how teacher recommendations, depending on how students are performing at the time the recommendation is made, reinforces another systemic and institutional barrier of tracked academic systems. These barriers produce and maintain disparate outcomes for groups of students. Ultimately, it is evident that Weagraff contemplates interpersonal bias as he considers change and proposes adjustments to his district's systems and structures related to acceleration and course tracking, but it is also essential for leaders like Weagraff to recognize and acknowledge the institutional and systemic inequities and issues associated with teacher recommendations.

Surprisingly, Assistant Superintendent Samuels was the only leader who described actions being taken by his teachers to address tracking and acceleration, along with the influence the teachers hold collectively to recommend, as well as create change within their district's instructional and programmatic systems, procedures, and practices. More specifically, one department of core content teachers in this district reviewed their enrollment data and determined it was best to eliminate a few of the course offerings within the department which also reduced the number of academic tracks for students. Assistant Superintendent Samuels stated:

We focus specifically on one grade level and one content area and then went backwards from there. That was, and to be quite honest, I think that is where also the teachers have had enormous influence. They then took that conversation and went back in and they made some decisions as a department as to what to do to try to reduce some of the quote / unquote tracking from their offerings. It was a very positive experience, but that was

because it was collaboration with the department itself. I think, it was huge because the changes were coming from them.

Ultimately, the data in this section represents both positive and negative examples of teacher pressure and influence to tracking and accelerations systems. Certainly, the final data example shared by Assistant Superintendent Samuels denotes a small bright spot of a district leader's support of positive change to tracking and acceleration systems. It highlights how a leader has the ability to influence and lead a cadre of teachers to change their viewpoints, positions, practices, and structures to better meet the needs of all students. It represents an equity focused commitment to change efforts. That being stated, the absence of encouraging examples from other district leaders generates more questions than answers as to why the leaders didn't describe the influence and pressure connected to decision-making, change, and regional action associated with tracking and acceleration through a more productive teacher focused lens. This lack of positive change is an indication that resistance to maintain the status quo is more pervasive in the leaders' districts as opposed to teacher influence and pressure for change. In the next section, I describe school board influence as it relates to change efforts.

### ***School Boards Influence & Pressure***

When thinking about regional influence and pressure associated to change efforts, 2 of the 6 Superintendents discussed the involvement of their Boards of Education when contemplating change. They highlighted the need to engage in meaningful conversations and to work collaboratively by being open to difference while educating and frontloading their policy makers. Superintendent Skinner described how engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations with her Board of Education has helped her slowly move forward within change. Skinner stated:

Like Superintendent Weagraff said, maybe peeling back the onion a little bit, but challenging, what do you believe and what do you think our organization emulates in terms of beliefs. I have a pretty conservative community and Board here. I'm conservative myself so it can be a little interesting to make sure that that conversation happens in a way that people are feeling like they understand what it is about and what it's not about. I have been engaging and some of those discussions [regarding DEI and access] people have thankfully felt comfortable reaching out. We have had some really great talks about it, the Board really heard the first mention of some of this work beyond me just mentioning it when we gave presentations on our last Superintendent's Day. What we did is we worked with our committees -- I do not really have people freaking out over here. I do not have, you know, people clamoring, but I do think my work is a little bit different from yours [referring to other Superintendents] and the focus will probably be a little bit different. I just appreciate how you [referring to other Superintendents] all have jumped in and [shared] the things that you have shared [during the focus group meeting]. I took many notes, while you were talking of different things [they are doing with their Boards of Education to Education to influence and shift mindsets] I can try next, so thank you!

Making sure Boards of Education are knowledgeable, committed, and prepared for change as the policy makers of the school district is an important component to understanding regional influence, pressures, and change. Boards of Education must be adequately prepped as decision-makers and influencers of policy. Additionally, Superintendent Skinner indirectly mentions the power of collaboration and establishing partnerships with other district leaders. Her statement

regarding “the things that have been shared” sheds some light to the power of regional collaborations and initiatives.

Superintendent Williams described how shared knowledge and learning is important for district leaders and Boards of Education. Collaborative conversations and discussion to understand the influences and pressures associated with change is an important aspect to progress, even in the face of embarking on different pathways. Williams explained:

A very specific point is another superintendent and I tried twice and I had a conversation. We were, you know, planning this board book study which actually came out of his board [Board of Education]. A member wanted to get our school boards together to do that and we [the superintendents] were very concerned because we had pathways planned and they are different. We were very concerned about getting our boards together and all of a sudden, you know, where there is the shiny object at the other school the narrative becomes, ‘How come we're not doing it that way?’ We [the superintendents] had a big conversation about that. So, I think it is a direct example to your point, you know, that we [district leaders] have the same intentions, but how we are getting there is different [because of pressure and influence], and I think that is appropriate.

This example highlights how different pathways are necessary when navigating the pressures and influences of Boards of Education. It also denotes how the intentions of district leaders are often blurred or different, but the outcome or goal to shift mindsets to navigate influence and pressure and promote positive change is consistent.

While one district leader shared commitments to engage in collaborative conversations, another leader described trust and the influence Boards of Education have on setting direction to impact change because of the pressures they [as authority responsible for the provision and

maintenance of schools] experience due to community interests and desires. Superintendent Fulton detailed:

Well, I think it all depends on us, the superintendents and assistant superintendents. There is a trust factor. There is a commitment factor. I think you've seen where there are certain things we agree upon and then one or two of us go outside and do something different. I think there's a core group that pretty much stays the course when we make an agreement, but the problem is, we all have different Boards of Education and some other factors that pull us at times, but I think for the most part we can do exactly what you've said [referring to regional collaborations] and I've seen a greater willingness for that in the last year and a half, based on the Pandemic and based on our meetings [referring to regional Chief School Administrator (CSA) meetings]. We want to be kind of on the same page doing some of the similar things because when we are not the community takes us apart.

Clearly, this section of the analysis suggests that when thinking about regional influence and pressure associated to change efforts Boards of Education play a significant role. District leaders need to engage in their Boards of Education in meaningful conversations and to work collaboratively by educating and frontloading their policy makers to support change tracking and acceleration systems. Additionally, this section brings to light examples of leaders collaborating together for the benefit of the greater good to educate their Boards of Education and school communities. More specifically, Superintendent Weagraff, Superintendent Williams, and Superintendent Fulton describe how collaboration around DEI initiatives and the COVID-19 Pandemic response is an essential element to moving initiatives, plans, positions, and actions forward. While this realization provides some context to this analysis, the simple fact that the

leaders seem to be talking in circles provides further rationale or explanation to the struggles they face as leaders attempting to navigate pressures and influence. As proposed, it is my position that regional collaborations, partnerships, ventures, and efforts to address inequities can be successful by helping district leaders navigate pressures and influences. Furthermore, it is my belief that establishing regional partnership and collaborative ventures is a necessary, as well as missing component to addressing the inequities associated with tracking and acceleration systems. In the next section, collaboration and competition are described as contributing factors of decision-making and change efforts.

### **Collaboration versus Competition**

In the section of the analysis on the third research question about how regional influences and pressure impact decision-making and change efforts, the district leaders describe collaboration and competition. More specifically, the leaders discussed how they collaborate with each other and how a nontraditional view of competition plays into their thoughts, actions, and decisions related to change and how they see tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools.

While engaged in the focus group discussion with other Superintendents, Superintendent Skinner highlighted her own learning based on a discussion connected to equity focused leadership decisions. She expressed her gratitude for commenting last during the dialogue. While discussing the importance of leading with an equity focus, the Superintendents gave examples of what they were doing to support change within their schools. One superintendent described engaging in professional development with their district leaders and training their staff on the culturally responsive and sustaining educational framework, while another superintendent shared about a regional book study they were engaging in with other area leaders. A different superintendent



talked about establishing community partnerships and working with outside agencies to engage their Boards of Education, staff members, and school community. Superintendent Skinner commented, “There's some benefit, and by going last I have learned a lot of awesome things” which highlights the importance of collaboration rather than competition. As such, all of the Superintendents expressed a desire to continue to work collaboratively, to support the work of DEI and culturally responsive teaching and learning, as well as to remain open for in-person instruction as opposed to closing schools because of the COVID-19 pandemic rather than compete against each other for the benefit of their students, as well as students within the geographic region. To further describe and analyze the data, I use the following subheadings to categories the analysis: Importance of Collaboration and Does Competition Really go Away?

### ***Importance of Collaboration***

When examining the concept of collaboration, district leaders wrestle with doing what is best for all students, including those in the surrounding region, and what is best for their individual districts and students. Superintendent Skinner describes why she believes it is important to work together with other Superintendents. She shared how the region’s Superintendents have worked together to manage their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the test-to-stay program by planning the rollout for schools, as well communications to families and the local media outlets. More specifically, Superintendent Skinner highlights this new forum for collaborating and sharing ideas brought about by the pandemic. To further clarify this reality, prior to the pandemic all of the region’s superintendents and assistant superintendents regularly met within their respective peer groups to discuss and share ideas, learn about New York State initiatives, and showcase or boast about what they were doing within their school districts. The pandemic required leaders within the region to rethink how they productively spent their time

together during meetings. In essence, this reimagining of time resulted in the creation of a new space to plan, communicate, and navigate the pressures and backlash that many leaders faced from their school communities because of disruptions to teaching, learning, as well as life brought about by the pandemic. The leaders' need to survive, manage, and lead their school communities through challenges that nobody had ever experienced forced the leaders to collaborate and work together. As a result of their time together in this new space, the leaders recognized the value and benefit to collaboration brought about by the pandemic. Essentially, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic has helped move the district leaders and school districts to experience the importance and benefits of regional collaboration. As expressed by Superintendent Skinner:

I have stolen more than one of your ideas, letters, and put my own version on it. I think we need that. I look for opportunities when I can do that too -- Yesterday we were all comparing memos on the media thing. So, I think it needs to be habitual. I do not think we're good about it being habitual. We let our own egos get in the way and we let our own mascots get in the way probably which is silly because we should be having those conversations and doing the work and working on change collaboratively. In fact, with all the brains that come out of this group, here in this group, we should be saying what do you come up with that we all think is right? Why would we try to corner another Superintendent or district? We are not a for profit [organization]. We are municipalities. It is not like I'm going to get a higher profit rate by stealing other districts students or ideas.

As articulated, collaboration is an essential component to successful change. All of the district leaders' words, statements, and actions appeared sincere. Their remarks were genuine. Based on

their interactions during the dialogue, they were all supportive of a shared commitment to change practices and work together to overcome obstacles they faced.

Correspondingly, Assistant Superintendent Lassard described how leaders work together to learn from each other for the benefit of all students. Additionally, this specific district leader described the need to move beyond working in a vacuum to address the inequities that exists within educational systems. Lassard explained:

I do not see it as a competitive thing. We are all in public schools, which is a unique job, right? We want to see our kids be successful. We want access for everybody. I think in my mind, the best way to move forward, to have a collective commitment, where we are all committed to doing this work -- to getting access to students -- to looking closely at our systems to see if they are really reproducing some of the inequities that we see in the larger society. I think most administrators I know, are willing to learn from others. It is not always easy, but to say “Hey if there's something that you’re doing better at your district and, I’ve had those conversations with him, let me know and I’ll be the first to call because I want to learn from them. We all sometimes get stuck in our silos and we have the ECHO chamber of what is and is not permissible in our own districts. We can do better and others are doing better. I do think there is a competitive nature of saying, ‘Hey we want to do as well as our neighbors because we don't want to be the ones falling behind.’ That said, I think that is a healthy, healthy thing if you are willing work collectively for improvement.

Working together and supporting each other is critical to the region’s success when implementing change. Superintendent Skinner highlighted the need to change the narrative regarding competition to collaboration. She stated:

So, we have to be in this together. We've got to figure this out together because if we try to isolate, we know that within our organizations, why wouldn't that be true regionally if we isolate you will fail. You have to be able to let the egos go, however the downside is that we will get compared to each other. So often that happens. Probably because of the size but also just because of the notoriety of the school districts that are in this area.

We've all got a name. We've all got a history. We've all got parents and community that, you know, go school district -- That's great, but we've been pitted against each other and we've got to be, and I think we're getting better at offsetting that when we say we're going to end that narrative.

Undoubtedly as the leaders navigated their thoughts, ideas, and positions regarding collaboration, they adjusted to the pressures associated with their roles, as leaders, and to the expectations of their school communities and stakeholders. In the end, even as the district leaders adjust to tension their words suggest they all express a strong comfort, desire, and commitment to supporting and working collaboratively to address issues, events, and challenges for the benefit of all students.

### **Does Competition Really go Away?**

The desire to be the best often creates contentious situations. As such, district leaders are often forced to navigate tension associated with doing what is best for their district as opposed to the region based on all of the influences and pressures created by the expectations of stakeholders within their school communities. Knowing that reality, one should question, “Does competition really go away?”

Superintendent Fanton explained how it is his belief that competition, from his perspective, is a thing of the past. Fanton explained:

You know, do I want my district to be a high achieving district of course, and, by the way, that this is what I think is different from in the past and it will be even better moving forward. I mean I really truly believe there was a competition that was just ridiculous in the past. I want the same for other districts. I don't have that one sided approach to benefiting just my district's students. Our work should be everywhere and I think it's that continued attention to collaboration that should be the focus.

While collective improvement is important component for regional success, Assistant Superintendent Samuels detailed how the size of the region and the close-knit aspect of the region's culture leads to competition from the interpersonal or district perspective – it is about competition from within and district specific. Samuels Said:

I also think the region is really small. I mean some of us worked together. Some are parents in other districts. I have two other close colleagues -- one is over at a neighboring district and the other is working with a new superintendent. As a matter of fact, I think there's a network there to ask for advice, to share advice, and sort of a desire to do, continue to continuously improve the student experience. I think, it is all there and so it's just a nature of maintaining those relationships and leveraging them to keep improving. I don't see us competing with other school districts or worrying what other people are doing. I think, like Assistant Superintendent Samuels said I call him and other colleagues from other districts, just to figure out, you know things that maybe we could do better. I think we're competing within ourselves more than anything. We are working constantly to try to get better for our students, not necessarily because we want to compete with other districts or anyone else.

Conversely, one of the district leaders, described how they do not feel pressure to compete with other districts, she described the feeling of pressure from parents and community members to compete with other districts. Lampman clarified:

Certainly, I do not feel like that is the case at all -- I don't! I don't personally feel that way. I think Superintendent Skinner would probably say the same thing, I think, but, we have a very sort of unique little community here. We are not necessarily near another comparable district where we feel that pressure of having to do the same things. I think the pressures we feel are more from parents, you know what parents view or see or want. That being said, I think, when I think about my own experience as a parent and resident of a different district, there is a definitely rivalry and competition with it.

Expanding upon competition and rivalry versus competitions, Assistant Superintendent Lampman expounded on how regional work and effort could lead to competition. Lampman conjectured that regional efforts could have the potential to prohibit improvement and change to tracking and acceleration systems because of district leaders' and a community's inherent desire to be the best – leading to unintended competition between leaders and districts. Lampman continued:

I could see it both ways I could see that, by having that regional conversation, yes, as an interesting discussion to see where people are, what they are thinking and perspective is. I also see it as potentially fueling the competition, even more; I mean I do think about, it is ironic! When I think about my district and my work here, I sometimes bring in my experience from other places I have worked and think “Oh my gosh we should be some be rising up in some of these areas.’ You know, how do we get that designation and I have to stop myself because that is only in my own head, based on what I’m experiencing

as a parent and former employee. So, it is interesting when you think about regional efforts, I think it could be potentially helpful, but I think it also could spur on the competition.

Another district leader described competition based on the leadership expectations of a former Superintendent's leadership style. Assistant Superintendent Maxwell described how things used to be prior to a major shift to collaboration and equity focused leadership:

I'm old. I always remind everybody I'm the oldest one in the room and my first superintendent was here for 20 years. He used to jump up on the table and bark like a dog every time our district took out a high achieving district on a graduation number or achievement recognition. He was passionately in competition with constantly running with the big dogs. He used to say and bark on the table. And, that was fun, but we've come so far from that in terms of, wait a minute, how did you close that gap Assistant Superintendent Maxwell, and then how to make doing all that great equity work successful. I didn't always have a clue, everyone was always jumping fast. So, that's just how it was to work I didn't call people very often.

Director of Curriculum & Instruction Dube' described the fact that competition is prevalent in leadership, mainly through the guidance and style of his Superintendent. The district leader shared how opportunities for collaboration is important to combat loneliness and improve opportunities for success. Dube' specified:

She [referring to the Superintendent] likes the idea that we do things on what we think is best for kids and it may or not be different or not than other districts, but there is certainly competition. I would say of wanting to be the best, but for me, I wish there was more opportunity to converse and have conversations with people in the same role that do the

same types of things that we do because it can get somewhat lonely. Like as far as just bouncing ideas off -- here's where we're at, the direction we're heading, does that make sense, like those types of things would be I think beneficial, but they don't happen as frequently as needed.

As evident by the majority of statements provided by the district leaders, competition is a contentious reality in our schools. Leaders are required to navigate competition based on outside pressures and influences. Therefore, the question remains, “Does competition really go away?”

Tension is real and complex for district leaders. On a regular basis, leaders are forced to contemplate decisions, actions, and strategies to improve systems, outcomes, as well as guarantee the success of all students. Undoubtedly, this findings section highlights the tension associated with collaboration and competition. Leaders must decide; however, I contend that collaboration as opposed to competition has a positive influence on school structures and systems, and as a result addresses the pressures districts feel as they support change to tracking and acceleration systems. In the next section, the theme – Checking Egos becomes centerstage of the analysis on decision-making and change efforts.

### **Checking Egos**

In order to think more clearly about regional influence and pressure associated to change and decision-making, leaders discussed the importance of checking their egos and being comfortable with focusing on relationships / partnerships, in addition to the bigger picture and not self-interests for the benefit of all students.

One superintendent shared how partnerships, trust, and lack of egos allow work to be accomplished for the benefit of all students. The Superintendent and his Assistant Superintendent’s teamwork built upon a positive relationship allows for collegial or shared



responsibility as they carry out the desired outcomes, mission, and vision of the district.

Superintendent Fanton shared his thoughts:

And, with Assistant Superintendent Maxwell that is amplified much more in terms of his knowledge, his institutional knowledge and his depth and of his skill level. I just have the fortunate connection of having known him since I was a kid that we have known each other the whole way along, but we have kept in touch enough that it has made it for me a natural partnership. I think we both do not have egos. It does not matter whose name is on it. We are good at what has to be done.

Building partnerships, expanding relationships, trust, and lack of egos, were described by some of the leaders because they felt the need to have honest conversations since egos can have an impact with relationships. Superintendent Skinner stated, “Egos and other things get in the way. Oh, egos definitely get in the way!”

She expanded by stating:

You've sat around our table [referring to chiefs' meetings with district leaders]. I will say the culture has improved around our table. That's probably one of the shining stars of the pandemic. I mean, I've been in several different regions. I've been a part of several BOCES regions and so coming here was a bit of culture shock to me. It was not a joyful initiation into a group of awesome colleagues. One of my early experiences in September of my first year one of the superintendent's wanted to have a drink with me at NYSCOSS [New York State Council of School Superintendent's Conference] and sat me down and told me that I should keep my mouth shut for the first year because nobody wanted to hear from me. I was new and I needed to just respect that – I turned to the person and said, ‘I got to be straight with you, I'm not in seventh grade. I am a frickin

Superintendent of Schools and, if I have something to offer I am going to offer it and if people hate me for it, or they do not want to hear from me fine – I do not really care! I am not a seventh grader! This is like ridiculous! I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my entire life!' So, admittedly, the tenor of the room, my first several, probably my first six months, did not inspire me to speak. I never have had a fear of speaking up, but I also do not need to speak just to hear myself speak. I just felt like there was, it was a very negative feeling in the room, it was depressing. I felt like people were extremely guarded like no one was showing you any type of their undergarments at all and that's a room where you can sort of take your clothes off a little bit and I just wasn't really inspired to participate. It was sort of hard to keep coming back. Honestly, because I was like I'm getting nothing out of this and I'm spending half a day doing it, but I'm a participator and I'm a believer in regional power. I think there is a lot of power in the region and how we support each other, how we share, and how we share resources. So, I stuck with it and started deciding that I was just going to say something if I had something that that I needed to like lean into and find inspiration someplace I hope to open my mouth, and so I started gradually doing that and got some positive feedback that people were happy that someone was saying something appreciative of what I had to say. I felt like okay, well then obviously I am contributing something to this group and it's inspiring to somebody or somebody in the room needed to hear it, so maybe it will encourage others to speak and come forward and just to make sure that I'm being courageous at what I'm saying, because, I mean, I have courage! I think courage has to start with some inspiration, but I do feel like we've grown [as a region], and I think COVID-19 [pandemic] and us having to take our 'clothes off' [referring to all decisions being exposed] we didn't have a choice

– like your clothes were off when you got in the room. We had to be vulnerable to one another, but no matter what's going on, I think I found my courage to just say – ‘I have something to say’ or ‘I’m getting a little disgusted with what’s being said.’ And, I know there’s other perspectives and opinions. I am not afraid to be the one to voice it even if it’s unpopular – I just don’t care! It’s, not that I don’t care about that group, it’s not that I don’t care about the people in it, I just think at some point even as leaders, we get inside our own heads and we’re afraid to be wrong and we’re afraid to be unpopular with our little peer group. And, I’ve had to make sure that that’s in check, you know, I’m okay being unpopular! I’ve been doing it for 32 years and I think people know that. I care about what I do and I do speak my truth.

Superintendent Skinner highlights the reality that all leaders must check their egos. Her experience as a new superintendent brings to the forefront the position of power and privilege, as well as the systemic issues of marginalization some leaders exude onto others while serving in the role of a district leader. Her experience calls attention to the fact that all leaders deserve a voice, to be heard, and valued, no matter their gender, ability, or color of their skin. Every superintendent must appropriately and honorably uphold or maintain the incredible role and responsibility they have as chief school officers for their districts. No person is better than any other. As this excerpt clearly details, attempts were made to marginalize the voice of Superintendent Skinner; however, her ability to confront egos and challenge inequality prevailed. That stated, all leaders must create a culture where others feel valued, supported, and acknowledged for their dedication and commitment to supporting what is best for students. Leaders have to be comfortable listening and respecting the positions and opinions of other

leaders, as well as stakeholders. Superintendent Skinner found the courage to confront resistance she experienced from other leaders which forced those leaders to check their egos.

While Superintendent Skinner highlighted the need to check egos and work together through uncomfortable situations, Assistant Superintendent Lassard highlighted the need to be comfortable with being vulnerable when working together regionally with other district leaders for the benefit of all students. Assistant Superintendent Lassard stated:

I think what you're getting at is that there's a vulnerability of saying, you know, we have to be healthy enough to say, 'Hey, I don't know and I like what I'm hearing from your district, and can I give you a call?' That comes with a vulnerability of we're all working our best, doing our best, and we all have unique situations in which we work, and unique cultures and unique histories we're battling against -- all that stuff and negotiating it every day. It's a tricky terrain, But I think you have to acknowledge that you've got to be a little bit vulnerable and unless you're ready to hold up your results and say I've read and I've reached where I need to be, I think it's much healthier to be a little bit vulnerable and say I've got work to do -- We all have work to do!

Superintendent Skinner stated:

We all know our core and it's great grounding that core and saying, 'This is what I'm doing -- This is why I'm doing it!' And, I'm either going to stick my ground or not be so pigheaded that if somebody challenges my core that I take pause and say, 'You know what, I should rethink this!' And I think that's the way we can leverage comparison to not make it about comparison in the competitive sense, but we can make it about how are we elevating each other. I don't have to be like, just like you. We don't have to all do everything in a group, but we do have to, you know set our egos aside and learn from

each other and sort of elevate all kids in our region, I mean, that's how I've tried to function, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

While most district leaders described leadership collaboration and the ability to check egos to support regional efforts to create change that benefits all districts and students, one Superintendent described the challenges of being a part of regional partnerships. Superintendent Allen detailed:

You know what I've found challenging with regional efforts is it has more to do with the fact that you're trying to get entities that serve different, varying types of communities, to all agree -- to head in a common direction. And, even if we have somewhat of an agreement about a direction, it seems as though varying communities want to take differing timelines or methodologies. I think it's one of the reasons why, for us, you know, we have set a pathway with our strategic plan to move ahead. And, if other school districts in the region join with us in doing that, as you know, in some aspects and other aspects, it may be, you know another school district with which we're working closely. We welcome that, but we don't want to be slowed down or not moving forward waiting for an entire region to come on board.

In summary, this small section focused on leaders checking egos helps provide additional clarity regarding how leaders associate regional influence and pressure to change and decision-making. As presented, the leaders described the importance of checking their egos and being comfortable with focusing on relationships and partnerships in order to benefit of all students within their school communities. This data supports the declaration that leaders see value in regional collaborations when egos are in check. It also suggests that regional collaborations and partnerships may be more prevalent as district leaders continue leading in their districts due to

their acknowledgement and attributing of the successful navigation through the COVID-19 pandemic in new collaborative spaces.

### **Conclusion**

District leaders leading for equity change all navigated regional influences and pressures in decision-making. They encountered influences and pressures from communities / families, teachers / staff, and Boards of Education. They all contemplated competition. The leaders highlighted collaboration and the benefits of working together to advance opportunities for all students. They all positioned their thoughts, ideas, and actions against all of the egos that often fill the Superintendents' or high-level district leadership member's inner-circle of colleagues. They navigated pressures and influences that impact how they think about decision-making and change efforts.

In sum, the following represents the major findings from this data chapter on navigating regional influences and pressures:

- A lot of pressures exist for district leaders as Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents / Directors of C&I. These leaders are forced to navigate - families/communities, teachers, Boards of Education, etc.
- Leaders desire to be collaborative and see the value, but struggle because they all see their role as leaders to make their districts better or to do what is best for their school communities.
- Leaders struggle to collaborate because they lack shared beliefs and goals. Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for collaboration, regional discussions, and navigation toward some common goals and practices. This

experience could assist leaders in strengthen and broadening a new norm of shared commitment and collaboration.

- Leaders say egos can get in the way of real collaboration and partnerships; however, they want to work together, but not at the expense of their district's recognition, momentum, school improvement efforts, strategic plan, or success.

In closing, as this study transitions to the final chapter, it is my hope that I have made a clear argument to expand upon the concept of regional collaboration as a necessary approach to successfully addressing tracking and acceleration systems in middle and high schools.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Conclusion: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

*“The goal is to transform data into information and information into insight.”*  
- Carly Fiorina (2004)

This research study was developed to aid leaders and educational researchers as they seek to better understand how district leaders understand and conceptualize tracking and acceleration systems, as well as navigate regional influences, pressures, decision-making, and change as they attempt to address tracking and acceleration systems in an era of renewed focus on equity-focused leadership and actions. In this study, I examined policies and practices that exist within my participants’ middle and high schools as I sought to make meaning of the realities and beliefs of district leaders. Additionally, I learned what leaders say they do about tracking and acceleration systems, as well as how they navigate regional issues, pressures, and influences as they attempt to lead change within their districts. As previously noted within Chapters 1 and 2, a gap in literature necessitated my desire to expand and enhance the literature that exists in the area equity of PK-12 leadership within tracking and acceleration systems. Prior to this study, no literature existed regarding the impact of regional influence and effort of school district leaders when examining academic tracking and acceleration systems. Through analysis of practices, policies, dialogue, and observations of district leaders, the construction of truth and meaning has led to the conclusion that leaders need a clearer understanding of the barriers and their role in shaping progress to overcome the disconnect between beliefs, data, and action. As a result, this concluding chapter summarizes the findings, implications, recommendations, and limitations of



my study, as well as positions the argument that regional work and collaboration is necessary to successfully address tracking and acceleration systems in middle and high schools.

### **Discussion and Analysis of Key Findings**

This section describes and summarizes the key findings that emerged from each data chapter. As noted, in this dissertation study, I explored the realities, resistance and beliefs of district leaders, as well as the role district leaders have in navigating regional influences and pressures associated with tracking, acceleration and accountability. Each data chapter revealed findings related to the research questions that guided my investigation and analysis:

- 1) What are the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration?
  - What do district leaders say about tracking and acceleration?
  - How do district leaders group students within their organizations?
  - What are acceleration and track options in each organization's middle and high schools?
- 2) How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools?
  - What do district leaders do about tracking and acceleration?
  - What do district leaders say gets in the way of de-tracking efforts?
  - How do district leaders address race, gender, class, and ability hierarchies with course tracking and acceleration systems?
- 3) How do regional influences and pressures impact decision-making and change efforts?

In the following paragraphs, I summarize the findings for each data chapter.

Data from Chapter 4 indicates that district leaders made sense of academic tracking through a very traditional, negative, and deficit-oriented viewpoint of students. The leaders' understanding of tracking focuses on educators intentionally or unintentionally assigning students to stratified levels of different courses and curricula. Furthermore, all of the district leaders' definitions and viewpoints coincide with the current body of research on academic tracking. As described in Chapter 2, tracking is a system of separating students by academic ability into groups for all subjects or certain classes and curricula within a school (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Wells & Oakes, 1996, 1998).

Conversely, district leaders held a very opportunistic constructed view of acceleration. They defined acceleration as consisting of advantages and access to opportunities in middle and high schools. In some regard, this definition expands or places a positive spin upon what we know from prior educators and educational researchers. More specifically, literature defines acceleration as students taking a course at one grade or more challenging course level while they receive simultaneous credit for an equivalent course at a higher grade or course level (Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2004, 2006; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, 2007, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Clotfelter, Ladd & Vigdor, 2015; Domina, Hanselman, Hwang, McEachin, 2016; Domina, Penner, Penner & Conley, 2014; Domina, McEachin, Penner & Penner, 2015; Dougherty, Goodman, Hill, Litke & Page, 2015, 2017; Marsh, 2016; Martinez, 2018; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008; Probst, 2019; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016; Xu, Fink, & Solanki, 2019).

The majority of district leaders indicated that tracking was an outdated and non-existent practice within their school districts; however, the course enrollment and CRDC data provided clarity that tracking is prevalent in all districts and that a different story, a story of marginalization and inequity, was apparent. This unfortunate reality is consistent with existing literature – not enough is being done to recognize and address tracking and acceleration because of the complexity and the longstanding norms, beliefs, resilience, and structures associated with tracking and acceleration (Burris, 2010; Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2004, 2006; Burris & Welner, 2005; Burris, Welner, Wiley & Murphy, 2007, 2008; Burris, Welner & Bezoza, 2009; Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008). Moreover, it is evident that the leaders struggle to argue against what Gamoran (1989) describes as the productivity and efficiency that proponents of tracking argue for when students are placed into the homogeneous learning environments.

Congruent with research by Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2017, 2008), Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009), this study confirms that tracking creates inequities within the schooling experiences of students. More specifically, students falling within “Advanced” track courses, sequences, and pathways are provided experiences and access to high quality curriculums, which in essence are unlike the experiences of the students, those often marginalized, disadvantaged, and oppressed members of “Local” (low-track) courses and learning pathways (Oakes, 1986, 1992, 2005, 2008).

Additionally, findings and analysis from chapter 4 amplify the fact that all of the districts’ policies and practices reinforce a hierarchical structure associated to academic tracking and acceleration. These policies and practices result in multiple track options (i.e., “Advanced,” “Local,” and “Regents”) being permitted to exist within the schools. Based on prior research by

Burris, Welner, and Bezoza, (2009), the findings confirm the influence that policy, placement, and enrollment decisions, practices, and criteria have on student placement which reinforces inequities within tracking and acceleration systems. This results in schools officially sorting and selecting students to various track options at the middle school level. Furthermore, the track options result in the following oppressive realities:

- Students identifying as Asian or white have more access to “Advanced” course placements including Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses based on their percentage of enrollment in that track, while all other students (mainly students of color) have the least access to “Advanced” course placements and are correspondingly placed more frequently in “Local” courses.
- Students identifying as female rather than male have slightly more access to “Advanced” course placements, as well as Advanced Placement (AP®), AP® Math and Science, and Dual Enrollment courses.
- Students labeled as having an IEP or LEP/ELL designation have essentially no access or very limited access to “Advanced” track course offerings resulting in the same population of students being placed in “Local” track course offerings at grossly disproportionate rates as compared to other students.

These realities are consistent to what critics of academic tracking contend. As argued by Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2017, 2008), and Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009), tracking creates inequities within the schooling experiences of students. Just like prior research studies, this dissertation study confirms that students falling within high track courses and sequences or learning pathways are provided experiences and access to high quality curricula, which contrast with the experiences of the often marginalized, disadvantaged, and oppressed members of low-

track or local classes, courses, and learning pathways (Oakes, 1986, 19982, 2005, 2008). As articulated by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), there is an opportunity gap between minority and disadvantaged students when compared to white students. Clearly, the findings from this study mirror data claims compiled by Ladson-Billings, as well as expand upon the discrepancies that exists for some students, specifically students labeled as having an IEP or LEP/ELL designation when compared to their counterparts.

Data from Chapter 5 indicated that district leaders have good intentions, but little is done to disrupt tracking within their districts / schools. As a result, what district leaders are thinking and doing about tracking and acceleration result in small or minimal actions, strategies, and/or changes. This major finding is disheartening because it aligns what we already know – according to Burris (2010) and Burris, Welner and Bezoza (2009), leaders have a responsibility to break down systems which have long separated and provided unequal opportunities for students based on their identities, abilities, and individual circumstances. Leaders have an obligation to enact structural and programmatic shifts to benefit all students.

While the findings suggest that many of the district leaders' actions are consistent with what Burris (2010) argues as necessities for producing positive change: 1) examining patterns and tracking placement data, 2) engaging in dialogue with staff and families about equity and access, and 3) eliminating prerequisites and course placement criteria, their actions are not enough. The very small efforts enacted by the district leaders do not result in transformative, sustained, and systemic change within their districts or schools. As argued by Theoharis and Scanlan (2015), leaders must constantly navigate competing pressures and resistance by using their positional authority to influence and lead change. Leaders play a critical role in ensuring equity for students. Similarly, Radd et al. (2021) contends that “leaders play a vital role in

creating excellent schools and ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students” (p. 30). Clearly, our nation’s schools and districts need dedicated leaders to advocate, influence, and lead change for the benefit of all students.

Lastly, findings within Chapter 5 depict the resistance to change associated with tracking and acceleration systems as an overpowering force compared to the small actions (e.g., leveraging diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, as well as conducting equity audits, establishing career pathways, personalized learning options, eliminating teacher recommendations and prerequisites, etc.) and efforts described by the district leaders as strategies for addressing resistance to change. In comparison to what Oakes (1992) contends, this study’s leaders struggle to address, adopt, and establish a culture of change focused on de-tracking efforts to disrupt powerful norms. As described by Oakes, the leaders must be willing to broaden reforms, engage in inquiry that is distinct, politically savvy, and focused on opportunity for the benefit of all students. Ultimately, this work requires risk-taking and more direct and deliberate efforts to challenge the status quo.

In Chapter 6, data indicated that a lot of pressures exist for district leaders. These leaders are forced to navigate families, communities, teachers, Boards of Education, and other stakeholders. The pressures and influences described by the district leaders are relatively consistent to what Oakes’ (1992) described through her three (3) dimensions of tracking reform – the political, technical, and normative perspectives. Conversely, in comparison to what Loveless (2009) found regarding policy makers, community groups, and parents being the least influential when examining tracking policies and procedures, this study’s findings indicate district leaders strongly believe these critical stakeholders have power and influence to create pressures which make it difficult to overcome deep-rooted norms and practices.

We know from other literature and Oakes' research that it is essential to expand a leader's scope of influence in doing this type of important work to include the creation of new norms, socio-political relationships, and technologies (curriculum, instructional strategies, resources). This is a proven way to create reform that will address the longstanding school cultures, curricula, and systems which maintain inequity among experiences, access, and learning opportunities for students.

Given the pressure and influence associated with each stakeholder group, the leaders desire to be collaborative. They see the value in collaboration with each other, in addition to colleagues from around the region and state, but struggle because they all acknowledge their role as leaders is to make their districts better and to do what is best for their own school communities. That said, this study's leaders highlighted attempts they have made to establish new norms as well as relationships to work collaboratively as a region to overcome obstacles. It is through their collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic they have been able to establish some trust, regional focus, and navigation toward common goals and practices. These experiences likely will assist the leaders in strengthening and broadening a new norm of shared commitment and collaboration which is essential to tracking reform. Lastly, the findings suggest that leaders believe egos can get in the way of real collaboration and partnerships; they desire to work together, but not at the expense of their district's own recognition or success or improvement efforts.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

This research study suggests that district leaders need to employ collective efforts and strategies, all of which require educators to actively work together to influence, change, and counteract pressures that create inequity within academic tracking and acceleration programs, to

eliminate barriers and ensure access for all students. This section highlights important implications and recommendations for practitioners, regional institutions and organizations, as well as leadership preparation programs. The implications are categorized under two subsections: Implications for Practitioners and Implications for Leadership Preparation.

### ***Implications for Practitioners***

The findings from this study create a sense of urgency for practitioners to address tracking and acceleration because change is desperately necessary. District leaders play a critical role in establishing, enforcing, and adjusting policies, regulations, and procedures for ensuring equal access, opportunity, and choice for students. Practitioners have the power, influence, and perspective to create change through decision-making and action to support the disenfranchised, oppressed, marginalized, and less privileged members of PK-12 school communities. District leaders and regional institutions like Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and other organizations, like the New York State Council of School Superintendents, are individuals and entities that must address tracking and acceleration systems.

### **Implications for District Leaders.**

From this research, I offer four recommendations that may assist district leaders with disrupting tracking and accelerations within their districts and schools. Most importantly, I suggest that the district leaders critically reflect on their beliefs and practices around tracking and acceleration while establishing regional conversations and action-focused communities of practice to address equity with tracking and acceleration systems. This work must be collaborative, focused, and data-driven. Examples of this work in action would include going beyond the examination and review of equity audit data by establishing networks of stakeholders to problem solve, create action plans, and develop strategies to disrupt the norms, traditions,



structures, policies, and practices associated with tracking and acceleration. The collaborative work would require reflection and strict adherence to measurable goals, objectives, and targets.

Coupled with establishing regional conversations, district leaders must also engage their staff members in professional development at the district and regional level focused on detracking / disrupting tracking, supporting and engaging all students, and using equity data to promote change. This work and training must closely examine leaders' personal beliefs, biases, and privileges. Training should include dialogue and analysis of data generated from equity audits focused on course enrollments and performance. Some examples of professional development and training which would be expected over a period of time would include book studies connected to equity focused practices and strategies, training on inclusive schooling, growth mindset, as well as culturally, responsive teaching and learning. To ensure successful implementation of practices and strategies, it is recommended that follow-up instructional coaching by instructional specialists or teacher trainers would be ongoing and job embedded so that feedback and reflection is relevant and immediate.

Additionally, I recommend that district leaders work regionally to reconstruct policies and regulations related to tracking and acceleration, as well as to establish support programs for all students. This work would require leaders to share and analyze current policies and regulations through an equity lens. Suggestions, recommended changes, and next steps would be reviewed at regional chief school officer meetings, as well as during curriculum and instruction councils. While the initial purpose of these collaborations would be to adjust the policies and regulations, the follow-up action would center on creating support programs for all students so they could be prepared and successful while engage in the new curriculums.

Lastly, I propose district leaders must hire building and district leaders as well as teaching staff who are focused on and committed to equity, collaboration, and transformation. Interview questions and hiring practices must focus on scrutinizing instructional beliefs and practices to ensure new staff members accept the challenge of changing systems and structures. To help leaders move beyond well-intentioned rhetoric, I recommend that interview questions contain examples and scenarios that require teacher, principal, and other leadership candidates to clearly articulate a position as well as communicate action steps to address a given inequity issue or problem and to create an equity-focused solution. These questions or scenarios could take the form of a writing task or remain embedded within the oral / face-to-face interview. Some examples of questions which may elicit dialogue may include: 1) What does academic tracking and acceleration mean to you? 2) Describe a time when you adapted your teaching practices to meet the different cultural and learning styles of your students? 2) Please tell us about how you incorporate the viewpoints and perspectives of underrepresented or marginalized groups of students within your curriculum and classroom? 3) Please provide a specific example of how you have challenged your colleagues to confront long-standing norms and/or traditions which negatively impact, oppress, or marginalize groups of students. Additionally, a scenario could be focused on reviewing equity data and prompting candidates to share how they would address or lead change to the wonderings they identify from the data.

### **Implications for Regional Institutions / Organizations.**

From this research, I offer one recommendation that may assist regional institutions / organizations with disrupting tracking and accelerations within districts and schools. Leaders within the organizations must prioritize establishing regional conversations and action-focused communities of practice (COPs) related to addressing equity with tracking and acceleration

systems. As described by Scanlan and Theoharis (2015), “Networked social justice communities are structured communities of practice that endorse shared, precise, measurable targets to address complex problems of equity practice” (p. 11). As described throughout this dissertation, academic tracking and acceleration are complex and long-standing systemic issues that require transformative and equity-focused solutions. It requires a coalition of innovators and leaders to shift practices, structures, and systems. This work must be collaborative, focused, and shared among district leaders and members of the institutions and organizations. As articulated by Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharis (2021),

The most reliable way to shift social construction, as is necessary in equity work, is through movement building. By movement building, we mean engaging as many others as possible who care about children, their learning, and equity, to support the work you are doing. This effort takes many forms, including building networks of leaders (a broad community of practice) and engaging local officials and organizations. (p. 202)

Ultimately, the proposed establishment of regional conversation networks and action focused communities of practice (COPs) must include a clear delineation of the equity problem (tracking and acceleration in schools), shared goals and commitments to address the problem, joint action planning and support of the equity change (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015; Radd et al., 2021).

### ***Implications for Leadership Preparation***

The findings from this study also create a sense of urgency for leadership preparation programs to prepare equity-focused leaders who are willing and committed to address tracking and acceleration. As such, I offer four recommendations from this research that will assist leadership preparation programs. Most importantly, preparation programs must engage future leaders in equity-focused discussions related to tracking and acceleration. This preparation could

take the form of engaging in debate after reading and analyzing texts, research, and data related to tracking and acceleration. The more prevalent equity-centered text, readings, and assignments connected to the inequities associated to tracking and acceleration are within all coursework and curricula, the more in-tune future leaders will be to examining and addressing inequitable practices and systemic issues as they work and lead their schools and districts.

Leadership preparation programs must engage future leaders in the examination of policies and practices related to tracking and acceleration. This work could become part of education law syllabi, assignments, and coursework. It may take the form of an assignment or project where future leaders analyze their own school or district's policies and regulations related to course enrollment, placement, acceleration, and/or concurrent enrollment. Future leaders could be expected to couple their analysis with data from their own schools or districts to ascertain whether the policies and practices were directly or indirectly creating inequities in their students' experiences.

Additionally, the leadership preparation programs must engage future leaders in equity data conversations as they relate to course enrollment, access, and achievement information. These assignments, projects, and engagements would prepare future leaders for conducting their own equity audits with teams of teachers, in addition to community members within their own school and district settings. This practice of collaboratively engaging in meaningful work with peers, researchers, and higher education experts would build future leaders' confidence, preparation, and a knowledgebase for establishing communities of practice and conducting equity audits as they experience resistance from stakeholders while serving in future leadership roles.

Lastly, leadership programs must engage future leaders in simulations related to communicating and advocating for change of tracking and acceleration systems to resistant stakeholders. As described by Dotger and Alger (2012), “The beauty and potential of clinical simulations stem from their ability to approximate the daily practices, situations, and circumstances that school leaders and teachers regularly experience” (p. 358). Similarly, Dexter et al. (2020) contents that simulations or active learning pedagogy “situate learning in a context-rich scenario” which “provide rich rehearsal opportunities to carry out leader practices,” as well as engagement in “cognitive activities in contexts that can approximate the daily challenges leaders face” (p. 178).

Given the complexity of tracking and acceleration systems and based on the resistance to change most leaders experience as they navigate shifts to long held beliefs, structures, and systems, it would be most important for leadership programs to establish a content-specific simulation that addresses this aspect of school and district leadership. A series of simulations centered on addressing the inequities associated with tracking and accelerations systems from multiple stakeholder interactions would be beneficial for future leaders to experience. For instance, scenarios could address: resistant teachers or counselors unwilling to let go of teacher recommendation processes, parent of a high achieving student not wanting their child to be in courses with struggling learners, and Board of Education members arguing for more exclusive and restrictive course placement policies and criteria. This preparation would allow future equity-focused leaders to contemplate, strategize, and articulate their thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and beliefs around supporting, including, and advocating for all students.

## **Limitations**

This study focused on PK-12 high-level district leadership and their understanding and beliefs around tracking and acceleration. Twelve district leaders comprised of Superintendents of Schools and Assistant Superintendents / Directors of Curriculum and Instruction from six different suburban school districts engaged in the study. The backgrounds, leadership experiences, and personal beliefs as well as biases surrounding tracking, acceleration, and regional influences were unique to each participant. As noted, the study included a small portion of suburban school district leaders from one BOCES region of New York State. This sample size potentially limits the transferability of the study.

As a school district leader, my own status as an insider, as well as familiarity with the leadership role and performing the job of a high-level district leader, had the potential to influence my participants' responses. While efforts were made to ensure credibility, open, honest, and confidential dialogue, my closeness to the district leaders could be considered a limitation of the study.

Additionally, prior to engaging in this research I anticipated an additional methodological limitation to be self-reported data through the participant observations (i.e., researcher memory recall from jottings, etc.), as well as my use of personal judgement as I contemplated and navigated the themes and findings from the data collected through semi-structured and focus group interviews.

## **Future Research**

During this study, a number of additional questions, thoughts, and ideas were raised which should be considered for future research. Addressing the questions, thoughts, and ideas will further contribute to literature in addition to my contribution and analysis on regional

influences, pressures, and change efforts surrounding tracking and acceleration. Areas for future consideration to enhance this research include an expansion of the current study to other BOCES regions within NYS, including to leaders of both rural and urban schools, as well as through the integration of building-level leaders so that their voices and perspectives are represented. In this section on future research, I identify the area for future study, the research questions, and any recommendations or adjustments to the research methodology, if needed, to enhance a future study.

### ***Expansion of Current Study***

Repeating and expanding this study which examines district leaders' influences, realities, resistance, and beliefs around tracking and acceleration to other BOCES regions within New York State could provide additional understandings and considerations that would benefit practitioners, other members of the field of PK-12 education and leadership, as well as leadership preparation programs. I recommend the expansion and inclusion of other district leaders from across New York State should include leaders working in rural and urban school settings. The study would utilize the same methodology, data collection processes and procedures, and research questions: 1) What are the realities and beliefs of district leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration? 2) How do district leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools? and 3) How does regional influences and pressure impact decision-making and change efforts?

While expansion across New York State school districts would enhance transferability of findings and generalizations related to the realities, influences, beliefs, and resistance within the New York State PK-12 educational system, it should be considered that any proposed future study could be replicated to district leaders and organizations across the United States. In

general, the entire field of education and leadership could certainly benefit from participation and rich descriptive analysis beyond New York State leaders and their school districts.

### ***Integration of Building-level Leaders Voices and Perspectives***

This study was intentionally limited to high-level district leaders as Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents / Directors of Curriculum and Instruction. I made this decision because research surrounding tracking and acceleration from building-level stakeholders, including perspectives and beliefs of administrators like Principals, Assistant / Vice Principals, and Department Chairpersons, as well as teachers, existed and appeared plentiful. However, I strongly believe that future research could benefit from integrating the voices and perspectives of building-level leaders into the larger conversation associated with my research study. More specifically, I envision an enhanced future study which incorporates a building principal (middle or high school) in the required participant list for each school district. The study would utilize the same methodology and data collection processes and would situate the examination and analysis using similar research questions: 1) What are the realities and beliefs of district and building leaders around issues of tracking and acceleration? 2) How do district and building leaders address tracking and acceleration within their middle and high schools? and 3) How do regional influences and pressures impact decision-making and change efforts? An additional focus group consisting of all of the study's principals would need to be added to the data collection processes and procedures, as well as the inclusion of the building level leader to the joint semi-structured interview held with the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent / Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

The integration of building-level leaders voices and perspectives coupled with the viewpoints of district-level leaders is likely to complicate and enrich the data generated from the



study. This would enhance transferability of findings and generalizations related to the realities, influences, beliefs, and resistance across the United States. Additionally, it is more likely, in general, that the entire field of education and leadership could benefit from additional analysis and investigations through the incorporation of building-level leaders.

### **Significance**

This study contributes to the field of PK-12 leadership because it highlights the need for transformative equity focused leadership to address the long standing, deep seated norms associated with academic tracking and acceleration. Additionally, this study provides clarity regarding how district-level leaders within organizations understand the realities, influences, and pressures associated with academic tracking and acceleration. Most importantly, this qualitative dissertation study provides the field of PK-12 leadership with a better understanding of how district leaders navigate regional influences and pressures associated with tracking and acceleration. This specific contribution is unique to this study because prior research on tracking and acceleration as presented within Chapter 2 primarily focuses on building-level leadership and teacher actions around tracking and acceleration as opposed to district-level leadership influence and understanding.

### **Concluding Reflections / Thoughts**

As a district-level leader and researcher engaged and fully immersed on this research journey to better understand and learn more about the influences, realities, resistance, and beliefs of district leaders around tracking and acceleration, I broadened my perspectives. I affirmed the importance of regional collaboration and efforts to address inequities that exist within our educational systems, structures, and practices. I confirmed my beliefs and assumptions that equity work is difficult and that many district level leaders allow for oppressive patterns to exist

and be maintained in schools. As a result, this study calls on high-level district leaders, like Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents / Directors, to employ their collective efforts and strategies, all of which require educators to actively work together to influence, change, and counteract pressures that create inequity within academic tracking and acceleration programs. This is the only way to effectively eliminate barriers and ensure access for all students. This plea for transformative change is a result of individual leader and district specific efforts falling short to adequately disrupt tracking.

Ultimately, I am hopeful this research will encourage district and building-level leaders to work together across district lines and regions to examine solutions, ignite change, and influence all stakeholders to make right what is often always wrong in many of our nation's schools. It is clear that suburban school systems, like many rural and urban schools, do well for certain populations of students, mainly the White, able, economically comfortable. Districts and schools must do better to create spaces for the marginalized, disenfranchised, oppressed, and less privileged members of the student population, mainly students of color, low income/poverty, and/or labeled as having a disability. In some small way, I am optimistic that this research will lead to dialogue, problem solving, and action to improve the experiences of all students through the collective efforts of equity-focused and socially just leaders.

## **Appendix A**

The following is the timeline/frame of this dissertation study:

<b>Major Component / Milestone of the Study</b>	
Spring 2021	Write Dissertation Pre-Proposal and Review with Committee
Summer 2021	Complete IRB Forms Begin Writing Dissertation Proposal
Fall 2021	Complete Dissertation Proposal and Review with Committee Secure IRB Approval  Obtain Consent/Permission from each Administrator/Leader  Begin Interviews, Conduct 2 <sup>nd</sup> Interviews, Transcribe and Analyze Interviews  Begin Participant Observations, Memo and Analyze  Begin Document/Artifact Review and Analyze
Spring 2022	Continue Data Collection, Analysis and Writing of Dissertation Review all Chapters with Committee
Fall 2022	Defend Dissertation

## Appendix B

### 1<sup>st</sup> Set of Interview Questions (Guide)

1. Please state your
  - a. Name
  - b. Preferred Gender Pronouns
  - c. Education
  - d. Job Title / Role within the Organization

*[Demographic Question – Asking this question is important because it provides the researcher with very concrete significant information about the participant. This information can be helpful in analyzing the socially constructed identity of the participant, as well as the responses (experiences, privileges, bias, etc.) shared during the interview, which are based on the participant’s identity.]*

2. What motivated you to become a school leader?

*[Background Question – Asking this question is important because it provides the researcher with very significant information about why the leader/participant chose to enter the field of school administration. This information can be helpful in further establishing comfort/trust with the researcher, as well determining if there was a defining moment, experience, or event that shaped the leader’s/participant’s life (i.e., positive or negative experience, a calling, desire to lead social justice work, etc.)*

3. How would you describe an “exemplary” and “supportive” leader (superintendent, assistant superintendent, director)?

*[Opinion/Value Question – This question will address the values, beliefs, and judgements of the leader/participant. It will help the researcher better understand what the participant believes to be the role of the leader in addressing issues within the field of education and leadership.]*

4. Can you describe a time when you felt uncomfortable making and communicating a decision to your school community? Can you describe the pressure from your community, your colleagues (other regional superintendents)?

*[Descriptive – Tour Question – Asking this question is important because it provides a description of a cultural, as well as social scene. Based on the experiences of the participant, the researcher can gain important information including knowledge of values, leadership style, communication skills, as well as how the leader responds to stress and leads change.]*

5. How do you model behavior and communicate your values to your leadership team, Board of Education, and superintendent colleagues?

*[Behavior Question – This question is designed to draw out from the leader/participant how they interact with their colleagues. More specifically, it is intended to clarify and address the role of the leader/participant in leading change.]*

6. In your own words, how would you describe leadership success?

*[Opinion or Value Question – Asking this question is important because it provides the researcher with a better understanding of the participant's beliefs about leadership success as a phenomenon. This question will highlight whether the leader/participant has a growth mindset or utilizes a deficit framework to discuss the performance of leaders. It will be interesting to see how the participant discusses marginalized groups of students.]*

7. Define course tracking. Define acceleration.

*[Knowledge Question – This question is designed to gather information regarding what the leader/participant knows about the terminology/language used within the research question. It is important for the researcher to know how the leader/participant defines the terminology.]*

8. Tell me what you know about the current method/process for determining if a student enrolls in course acceleration for mathematics and science

*[Knowledge Question – Asking this question is important because it will provide the researcher with an understanding of what the leader/participant knows about policies, procedures, and criteria for student enrollment into acceleration programming. It will be telling to see if the leader/participant highlights their role (if any) in the process for determining student readiness for acceleration.]*

9. Tell me about a specific issue(s) you have dealt with as a leader related to the placement of students in courses or classes. What was as your role and/or responsibility in this issue?

*[Once-Upon-a-Time Question – This question is designed to have the participant describe their experiences with course placement, tracking, stratification, and the acceleration of students. The role a leader/participant plays in confronting a specific issue will become clear through this question. It may help the researcher answer the overall research question based on a better understanding of roles/responsibilities.]*

*[Explanation Question – This question is designed as a Follow-up Question. The intent is to clarify the role and responsibilities of the leader/participant and to highlight systems of power within the issue.]*

10. As a school leader, what advice would you give to students, families, principals regarding accelerated or advanced placement courses?

*[Advice Question – This question is designed to share personal philosophies regarding acceleration – Does the leader/participant advocate opportunity, supports, and growth or*

*communicate deficits, disabilities, and lack of readiness? This question will highlight how the leader/participant views “gatekeeping” and other subjective methods of entrance enrollment in acceleration programming.]*

11. How do you feel about the following statement taken from researchers Theoharis and Scanlon (2015) -- “Socially just schooling is evident when educational opportunities abound for all students, when ambitious academic goals are held and met by all students, when all students and families are made to feel welcome in the school community, when students are proportionately distributed across all groupings in the school, and when one dimension of identity (such as one’s race or home language or gender or sexual orientation) does not directly correlate with undesirable aspects of schooling (such as being bullied, struggling academically, or dropping out of school). (p. 4)”?

*[Quotation Question – This question will tell the researcher a lot about the feelings and opinions of the leader/participant. One could presume that leaders who do not feel positive about the statement would create and enforce policies, practices, regulations, and practices that discriminate against marginalized groups of students. Knowing whether a leader/participant strives to eliminate inequity among students is important to leading educators and students in a socially just way. This question will ignite/highlight the role the leader has in ensuring all students have access to rigorous, high quality curriculums.]*

12. Option A\*

How do you feel about the following statement on tracking from Oakes, Joseph, and Muir (2004) – “Tracking influences students’ access to various courses and thereby their exposure to curriculum knowledge, their classroom learning experiences, and their learning outcomes.” (p. 82)?

*[Feeling Question / Quotation Question – Again, this question will tell the researcher a lot about the feelings and opinions of the leader/participant. One could presume that feelings of acceptability regarding the statement lead to a privileged, entitled, and “better than” perspective which advocates for continuation of tracking, as well as exclusionary acceleration policies, guidelines, procedures, and practices. Feelings describing this is not acceptable presume the need to change and/or reform systems and structures to ensure equal access and opportunity for all students.]*

Option B\*

Linda Darling Hammond (2010) examined the way in which our educational system and structures create systemic failures / conflict for our nation’s students. She found the following:

“Unequal access to knowledge is structured in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In U.S. schools, far more than those in high achieving nations around the world, this occurs through allocation of different programmatic and course taking opportunities to different students very early in their school experience.

Sorting and tracking often begin as early as kindergarten or 1st grade, with decisions about which students will be placed in remedial or gifted programs and with differentials among affluent and poor schools in what is offered.” (p. 51-52)

How do you feel about Darling Hammond’s statement?

*[Feeling Question – This question is designed to get the leader/participant to react with emotion and/or passion about the injustices highlighted by Darling-Hammond’s work. This question will give the researcher a good sense of how the leader/participant either advocates for equity for all students or maintains the status quo of the educational system. Based on the participant’s response, the role of the leader in addressing the research question will be more clearly defined.]*

13. What have you learned from your experiences in handling issues related to course tracking / acceleration / stratification?

*[Knowledge Question – This question is designed to gather information regarding what the leader/participant has learned from his or her experiences related to the topic. It is important for the researcher to know how the stories of the leader/participant have shaped their thinking as it relates to their role in addressing course tracking / acceleration / stratification.]*

14. What advice do you have for other leaders regarding tracking / acceleration of students?

*[Advice Question – This question is designed to share personal philosophies regarding tracking / acceleration / course stratification – Does the leader/participant advocate opportunity, supports, and growth or communicate deficits, disabilities, and lack of readiness/preparation? This question will highlight how the leader/participant views and utilizes both positive and negative experiences to mentor/lead other leaders who address or confront similar systems within school structures/settings. This question will also provide additional data related to the role of the leader.]*

## Appendix C

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Set of Interview Questions (Guide)

#### Equity

1. In your own words, how do you define equity?
2. What steps have you taken to pursue equity within your district?
3. Please describe a time when your influence and leadership led to equity for students? Staff? School community?
4. What are the strengths of your district in terms of educational equity?

#### Tracking / Acceleration

5. How are students grouped within your organization?
6. What are the specific acceleration and track options within your middle and high schools?
7. What influences do you have with student placement (tracking and acceleration of students)?
8. After reviewing the number of students / percentage in accelerated and non-accelerated courses from your district's equity data, please talk about or discuss your reactions? What does the data suggest?
9. What gets in the way of de-tracking efforts?

*[Knowledge Question – This question is designed to gather information regarding what the leader/participant has learned from his or her experiences related to the topic. It is important for the researcher to know how the stories of the leader/participant have shaped their thinking as it relates to their role in addressing course tracking / acceleration.]*



## **Change and Influence**

10. How does your district pursue or implement change?
11. Describe how you influence change?
12. What are the organizational structures and processes that support organizational learning and change?

## **Decision-Making and Influence**

13. How does what other superintendents (assistant superintendents) and/or school districts do impact your decision-making?

*[Knowledge Question – This question is designed to gather information regarding what the leader/participant has learned from his or her experiences related to the topic. It is important for the researcher to know how the stories of the leader/participant have shaped their thinking as it relates to decision-making.]*

14. How does regional pressures and influence affect your decision-making and change efforts? (i.e., Snow Days, Accountability, Regional Initiatives, Competition, District Recognition)

## Appendix D

### Paired / Joint Set of Interview Questions (Guide)

1. What words or feelings come to mind when you think about tracking, acceleration, and regional influence?
2. How likely are you to commit to a regional effort to address tracking, acceleration and the stratification of students? What do you foresee as challenges from a regional and/or district perspective?
3. I'd like you to assume that another high performing district within our region makes the decisions to de-track students in their middle and high schools. Talk about how that district's decision impacts your actions within your district.

### Review District's Acceleration / Tracking / Course Placement Policy / Regulations:

4. Talk about the challenges you face in your role when it comes to making changes to tracking and acceleration policies, practices, and procedures?
5. If you recommend change to policies, regulations, guidelines, and practices related to acceleration and course placement what would it look like?

*[Advice Question – Asking this question is important because it will provide the researcher with a clearer understanding of the participant's personal philosophy and beliefs about acceleration / course tracking / stratification of students. There is no right or wrong answer to this question but may provide insight into each leader's thinking based on the focus group discussion and the regional equity data. It will provide valuable information about equity and access for all students, specifically marginalized groups of students who may not have access to rigorous coursework based on current policies, regulations, guidelines, and practices.]*

6. Are there any other points you'd like to make about this research study / project?

## Appendix E

### Focus Group Set of Interview Questions (Guide)

1. As superintendents (or assistant superintendents and directors), talk about how you support social justice or equity focused leadership in schools.
2. As superintendents (or assistant superintendents and directors), describe how you go about initiating and/or engaging your stakeholders (community members, parents/guardians, students, Board of Education Members, administrators, and staff) in decision-making. What does it look like?
3. What evidence/data do you have to support regional initiatives or decisions that has helped improve your individual school districts and community?
4. In what ways have the influence of other superintendents or district initiatives and decisions impacted your vision, practices, and decisions?

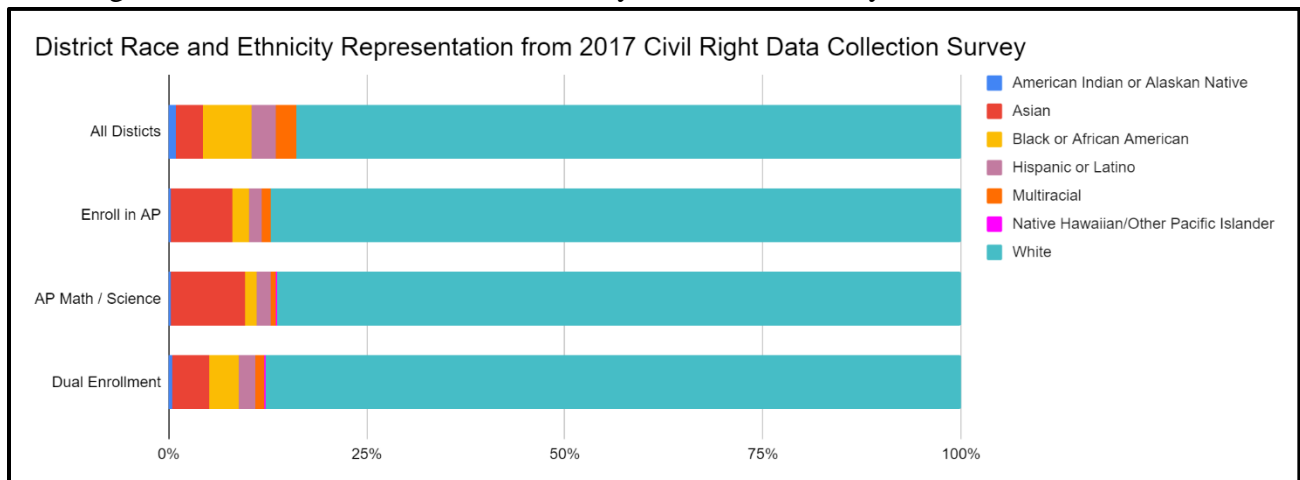
### Review of Regional Acceleration and Tracking Data:

(Present / share compiled equity data for the CNY schools in the study)

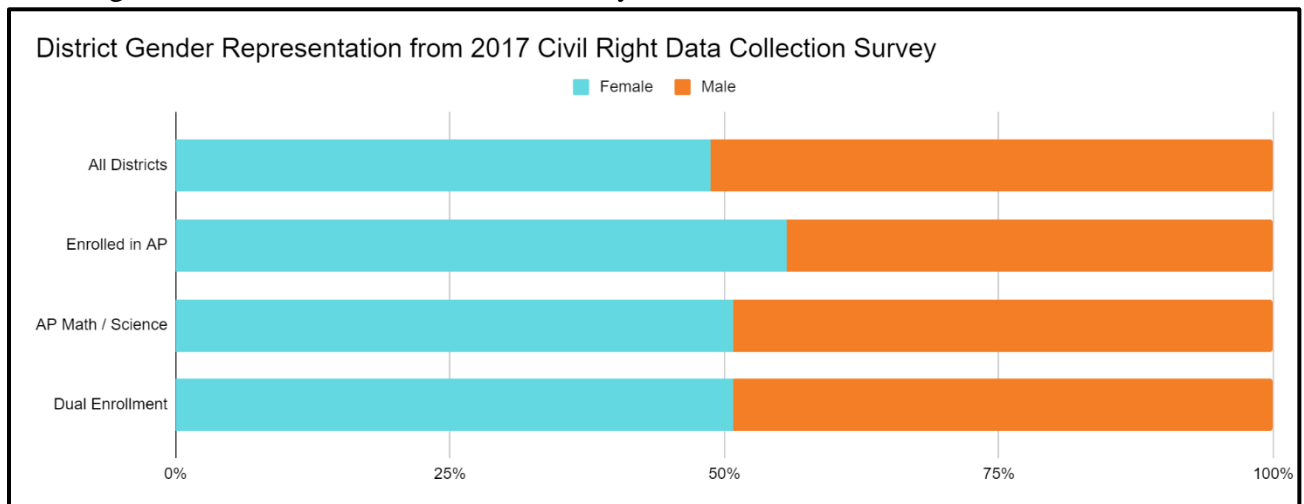
As the data is reviewed, ask leaders to think about the following:

- What did you notice in the data?
- What resonated with you?
- What made you feel uncomfortable?
- What made you proud?
- What does this mean for your work? For your work with your own leadership team? For our work as a region?
- What problems does this study point to that we need to solve?

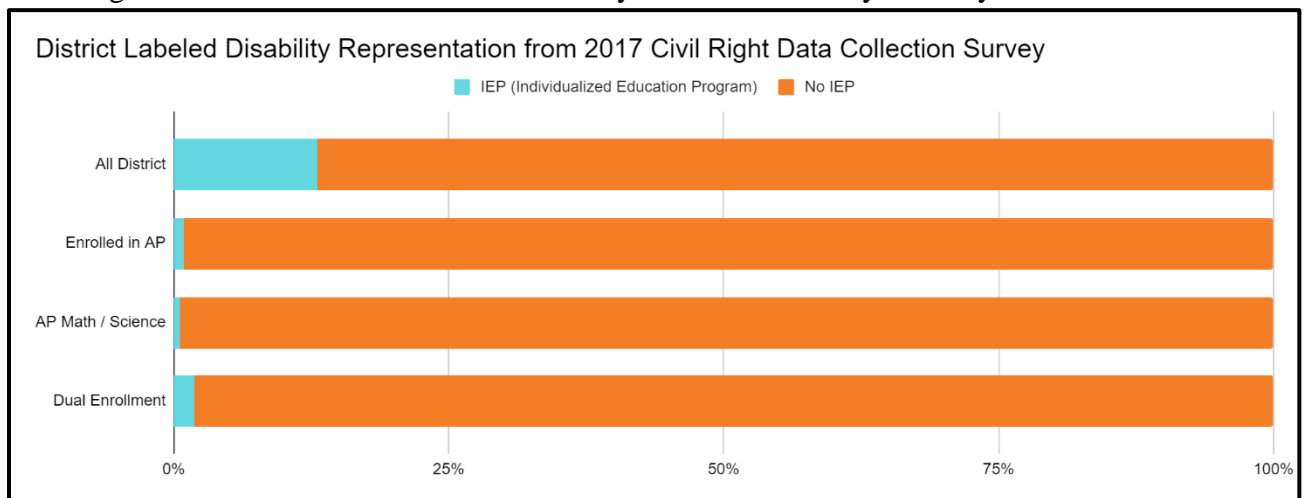
### Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Race and Ethnicity



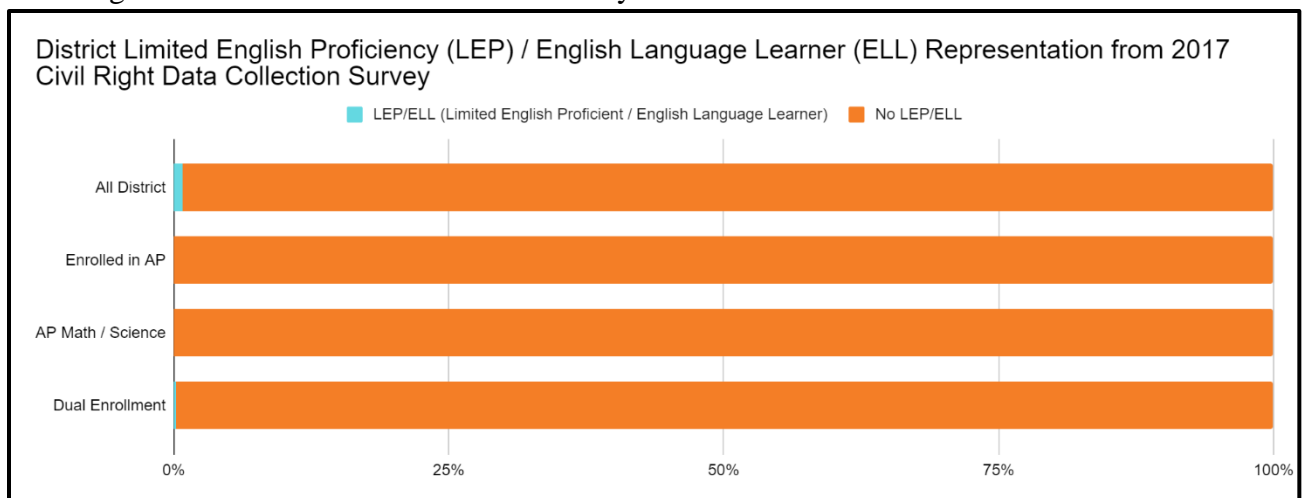
## Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Gender



## Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by Labeled Disability / Ability



## Civil Rights Data Collection Enrollment Data by LEP / ELL



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## Vita (Biographical Data)

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### EDUCATION

<i>Spring 2023</i>	<b>Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)</b> <i>Successfully Defended Dec. 2022</i> SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, Syracuse, NY <i>Educational Leadership</i>
<i>Spring 2006</i>	<b>Certificate of Advanced Studies</b> SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, Syracuse, NY <i>Educational Leadership</i>
<i>Spring 2004</i>	<b>Master of Science Degree</b> LE MOYNE COLLEGE, Syracuse, NY <i>Secondary Education</i>
<i>Spring 2002</i>	<b>Bachelor of Arts Degree</b> SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, Syracuse, NY <i>Mathematics &amp; Mathematics Education</i>

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Baldwinsville Central Schools, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Acting Superintendent of Schools</b>	<i>October 2022 to January 2023</i> <i>March 2020 to June 2020</i> <i>November 2020 to August</i>
Baldwinsville Central Schools, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Deputy Superintendent</b>	<i>April 2016 to Present</i>
Baldwinsville Central Schools, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum &amp; Instruction</b>	<i>July 2013 to April 2016</i>
Charles W. Baker High School, Baldwinsville, NY <b>High School Principal</b>	<i>July 2009 to June 2013</i>
Charles W. Baker High School, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Assistant High School Principal</b>	<i>August 2007 to July 2009</i>
West Genesee High School, Camillus, NY <b>Assistant High School Principal</b>	<i>July 2006 to August 2007</i>
Van Buren Elementary School, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Acting Elementary School Administrator</b>	<i>April 2006 to May 2006</i>
Charles W. Baker High School & District Office, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Administrative Intern</b>	<i>September 2005 to June 2006</i>
Charles W. Baker High School, Baldwinsville, NY <b>Mathematics Teacher</b>	<i>September 2002 to June 2005</i>

### PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

- ❑ *Past President of Section III Athletics of the NYSPHSAA* July 2022 to Present
- ❑ *President of Section III Athletics of the NYSPHSAA* July 2020 to June 2022
- ❑ *President-Elect of Section III Athletics of the NYSPHSAA* July 2018 to June 2020
- ❑ *Cabinet Committee Member of NYSCOSS* July 2016 to Present
- ❑ *Syracuse Univ. School of Education Field Relations Advisory Member* May 2018 to Present
- ❑ *OCM BOCES Aspiring Leaders Institute Advisory Board Member* Nov. 2018 to Present
- ❑ *OCM BOCES Teacher Leadership Program Advisory Board Member* Jan. 2019 to Present
- ❑ *OCM BOCES Innovation Tech Advisory Council Member* Sept. 2018 to Present

### AWARDS / RECOGNITION

- ❑ *Future Superintendents Academy Fellow (2015-2016)* — Sponsored by Leadership for Educational Achievement Foundation (LEAF), Inc. and the New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS)
- ❑ *Distinguished Guest* at the 135<sup>th</sup> commencement exercises, June 2004 — honored by Charles W. Baker High Class of 2004
- ❑ *Academic Achievement*, June 2006 — honored by Superintendent's Alumni Association at Syracuse University

### PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association for Supervision and Curriculum  
Development (ASCD) American Association of School  
Administrators (AASA)  
New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS)