

INTERVIEW

Tackling Equity at Atlanta Public Schools

A Q & A with Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones

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In fall 2020, Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones was appointed the first chief equity and social justice officer for Atlanta Public Schools in Georgia, charged with the ambitious agenda of reducing or eliminating historic disparities between students of color and White students in measures of educational achievement, disciplinary matters, and other key areas.

Dr. Baker-Jones began her teaching career 19 years ago in the Los Angeles Unified School District and went on to serve in a variety of leadership roles across the K-12 spectrum. She has worked as a teacher, principal, and district leader in Newark, New Jersey, as a nonprofit leader in New York City, and as an adjunct professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

She has been recognized for always bringing an equity lens to her work, seeking to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments for every child in every classroom, every day. Dr. Baker-Jones was recognized by President Barack Obama as a White House Community Leader in Education. She was the recipient of the 2014 New Jersey State Charter School Administrator of the Year Award and the 2020 Harvard University Graduate School of Education's Afolabi Award for Commitment to Educational Justice. Her work has been featured in publications such as the *New York Times* and on the CBS *Early Show*.

A first-generation college graduate, Dr. Baker-Jones completed her general studies at Howard University and earned a B.A. in history and Near Eastern language and culture from UCLA. She then went on to earn an M.Ed. in urban education from UCLA, an M.P.A. in nonprofit management from Rutgers University, and an Ed.L.D. (Doctor of Education Leadership) from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

As Dr. Baker-Jones begins her work in Atlanta Public Schools, she shares with us her thoughts on and approach to tackling equity in education.



Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones

Chief Equity and Social Justice Officer
Atlanta Public Schools (GA)

What has been a key experience that most impacted the way you think about equity as an education leader working to forge systemic, lasting change?

The key experience that has impacted the way that I think about forging systemic and lasting change is the recent insurrection at our nation's capital. I feel that the focus of equity work has primarily been on improving the educational experiences and outcomes of students from historically marginalized communities. While this work is vitally important, the recent insurrection at our nation's capital illuminated the need to focus our efforts and energy on the educational experiences of students from dominant backgrounds as well. How are they defining democracy? What value are they placing on pluralism? According to their worldview, who does and does not deserve access to justice? Who is or is not included in our creed of *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One)?

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As educators, we help to create citizens who understand the value of these ideals and who embody them through an authentic belief in justice for all. The decisions we make every day — what we choose to teach, how we interact with students, how we treat families — all of it plays a crucial role in how children come to see the world and engage with it. Because of the events at our nation's Capitol, my conviction is even more confirmed that if we want to see a more equitable and just society, we must ensure that all of our students, regardless of their background or the diversity within our districts, are receiving learning experiences that are truly reflective of the rich tapestry that has shaped our nation.

We can no longer tolerate monocultural learning experiences in any of our nation's schools. In doing so, we do a disservice, not only to our students, but to our nation as well. As an educational leader, ensuring that we create

engaged citizens, prepared to take on the responsibility of creating a more perfect union — where our pluralistic and democratic ideals are realized for all — is of the utmost priority. It's the key to ending these recent acts of violence and to truly seeing lasting systemic change.

How do you define success in your district with regard to equity and inclusiveness?

Our equity office is new. We have only been operational for less than a year now. As a result, we're still ironing out what short-term and long-term success will look like. However, we do know that long-term success will be achieved when we have broken the predictive link between demography and outcomes in our school district. Ideally, an equitable school system would be one in which each student has the resources and supports they need to achieve their full potential.

Our board has embarked on a journey to set five-year, student-focused, outcome-based goals and guardrails. They have drafted goals around literacy proficiency, numeracy proficiency, post-graduation preparedness, and college and career readiness. They have also drafted guardrails which serve as inputs related to what the district will do to ensure that the goals are

met. Our board has drafted five-year guardrails around equity, stakeholder engagement, culture and climate, and innovation and accountability. District administration, in turn, has drafted interim goals and guardrails and we are in the process of receiving stakeholder input and feedback on both.

How do you measure success? Do you have a few metrics that you would suggest to others?

In terms of the metrics, I recommend that district leaders measure high performance on a more holistic set of quantitative and qualitative measures. Students should also be allowed to demonstrate mastery via a portfolio of assessment measures and formats, and districts should factor in performance around social-emotional and healthy identity development in measuring student outcomes as well.

What are the two to three foundational principles that are important for an organization that values DEI?

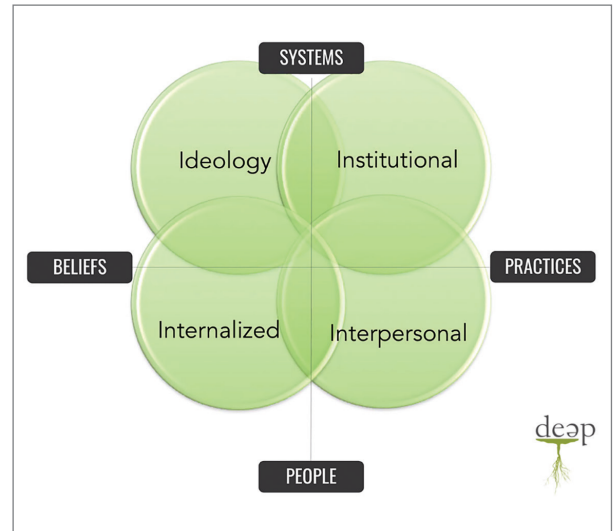
Inequities are manifested in four ways: they can be ideological, institutional, internalized, and interpersonal. The internalized and interpersonal are manifested at the people level; the ideological and institutional are manifested at the systems level (*Exhibit 1*).

As district leaders, our job is to lead change at the systems level. Yet, many districts focus their equity efforts on inequities manifested at the people level; they invest heavily in implicit bias trainings and building the cultural competency of their staff. While these are very important and necessary efforts, emphasis must be put on interrogating the structural ideologies and institutional systems and structures that provide the conditions for implicit biases to be internalized and cultural incompetency to be acted upon. As my colleague Dr. Darnisa Amante-Jackson states, as district leaders, we must go softer on people and harder on systems. We must place our hard critique on the organization and give our people the grace to grow.

In critiquing our system, we should ask ourselves:

- What policies, practices, and structures are creating our current outcomes?
- What organizational ideologies do these institutional practices, policies, and structures reflect?
- How do we ensure that all of our organizational systems are aligned to a theory of action and a strategy that is grounded in equity?
- How do we begin to shift our ideological beliefs?

Exhibit 1 THE FOUR "I's" OF OPPRESSION



Source: Disruptive Equity Education Project, <https://digdeepforequity.org>.

How do you go about tackling this work?

At Atlanta Public Schools, we haven't done an equity assessment since 2014. So, our first goal is to produce a comprehensive assessment of the district to determine the degree to which inequity is a problem and what its major sources are. We are also aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has likely exacerbated inequities that already existed, and we need to be sure to take stock of that, too.

Basically, we need to ask: What is the current state of the district as it relates to equity? Answering that will help determine what needs to change, what systems need to be put in place, and what cultural shifts need to be made. Related to that: We need to gather and examine data in the district. Currently, we don't have a centralized dashboard for equity-focused data. If you want to find equity-focused data, you must pull and comb through multiple

Tauheedah F. Baker-Jones Timeline



2004–2005

Los Angeles Unified School District - Teacher



2005–2010

Newark Public Schools - Teacher



2010–2012

Urban Arts Partnership - Program Director



2012–2015

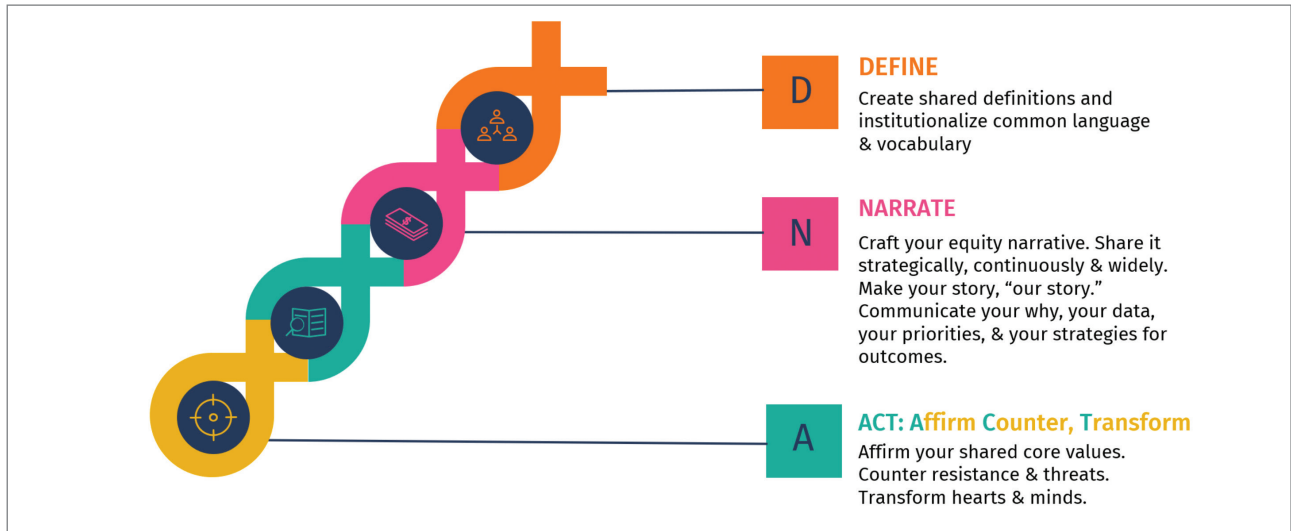
The Paulo Freire Charter School - Founding Principal



2015–2017

The Paulo Freire Charter School - Superintendent and Chief School Administrator

Exhibit 2 THE DNA EQUITY COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK



Source: Tauheedah Baker-Jones, Ed.L.D., <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tauheedahbaker>.

sources of information to find the data that you need. We need to create an equity data dashboard to be more data-informed and equity-guided.

We must also propagate an organizational ideology that values DEI work, and communicate that narrative continuously and widely, so that it is internalized by the folks within the organization. In this way, you begin to create a new mythos and organizational belief system. To support districts in doing this, I created a framework that builds on the Affirm, Counter, Transform (ACT) communications framework by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE).¹

My framework supports district leaders in embedding a DEI-focused ideology within their organizational DNA. The framework is known as the DNA Equity Communications Framework (*Exhibit 2*). DNA stands for “Define, Narrate,

ACT.” Defining requires that you create shared definitions and institutionalize common language and vocabulary. Narration calls on the district to craft its equity narrative, share it strategically, continuously, and widely. As Simon Sinek states, “you must start with your why,” and to implement the narration phase with fidelity, you must make your story “our story.” Lastly, ACT is the acronym adopted from GARE [Affirm, Counter, Transform]. In your communications, you must affirm your shared core values, counter resistance, and transform hearts and minds.

How do you build the capacity and expertise of all educators in your district so they can be equity-centered instructional leaders of schools and classrooms?

One way that I help all educators in our district to be equity-centered leaders is by creating systems and structures that prompt them to rethink how they use data to



2018–2019

Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research - Facilitator



2019–2020

Harvard University Graduate School of Education - Adjunct Professor & Teaching Fellow



2019–2020

Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project - Facilitator



2019–2021

Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education - Leadership Fellow



2020–present

Chief Equity & Social Justice Officer



It is critical that school districts build intentional ways of working that center the voices of those who are marginalized, use data in ways that humanize, and ultimately make decisions in collaboration with the community that they serve.

consistently and equitably allocate our people, time, and money. We have done this by embarking on the creation of several data indexes that district leaders can use in their decision-making processes to ensure that every child gets the resources and supports they need to succeed. These are called our OTIS (Opportunity, Tangibles, Intangibles, and Supports) Indexes.

- The **Opportunity** Index identifies community-wide barriers to opportunity, including access to quality healthcare, healthy food options, etc. — and the conditions that can be used to identify and advance equity.
- The **Tangibles** Index reviews data at the school level related to diverse student outcomes, curriculum, discipline data, AP and Advance Course enrollment, and electives to understand the current landscape of offerings and supports in each school in the district.
- The **Intangibles** Index reviews data at the school level related to social-emotional learning, restorative practices, mental health supports, and wrap-around services to understand the current landscape related to more intangible data that we know have positive impacts on student outcomes.
- The **Supports** Index looks at district-level data and evaluates how the district is leveraging its resources to ensure that we are providing for the basic needs and conditions necessary to identify and advance equity at the school level.

These indexes can be used by district and school leaders in their decision-making process to ensure that resources are being allocated to the areas where they are most needed.

In addition, our team works to ensure that our overall strategy implementation and decision making are data-driven and equity guided. We have two equity data strategists

who work to ensure that we are gathering the right data, qualitative and quantitative, and that we are disaggregating this data in a way that will allow us to uncover the extent to which equity or inequity is present within the system. The Equity Strategy team also works to support the implementation of equity-focused, evidence-based practices for entities throughout the district by offering thought partnership around tackling complex equity-focused challenges and serving as accountability partners to divisions, departments, offices, and schools.

What are some key tactics you think can help successfully engage stakeholders?

The main goal of a district's equity work is to engage educators, community stakeholders, caregivers, students, and families to build trust and solve complex problems together. To do this, we must work to be inclusive in our leadership practices. This means that our stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, students, and families) must have a voice in the problem-solving and decision-making process. It also means that we must act intentionally to ensure that those most proximate to the problem are at the forefront in these discussions. While it may be important to move quickly and decisively, we must take a moment to ask intentional and deliberate questions to ensure that we're showing up as our best organizational selves to stakeholders when it matters most. Some of the questions that I have shared with our district leaders that must be addressed in the decision-making process include:

MINIMIZE DISPARATE IMPACTS

- Which different groups will be impacted by this decision, and how? Is there a way to create a more equitable division of impact?
- To what extent are roles and responsibilities defined to emphasize equity and accountability?

DON'T RELY ON ASSUMPTIONS

- What assumptions am I making about the needs or wants of our stakeholders?
- How can I check those assumptions?

LEVERAGE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

- Whom can I involve here? Who can bring a perspective I haven't yet considered?
- Are the voices and perspectives of the people experiencing the problem involved in the problem-solving and decision-making process?
- Did I account for community engagement, and have I engaged potential partners?

CONFIRM VALUES-ALIGNMENT

- Which organizational value(s) is this decision grounded in?
- Does it conflict with any of our other organizational values or my personal values?

It is critical that school districts build intentional ways of working that center the voices of those who are marginalized, use data in ways that humanize, and ultimately make decisions in collaboration with the community that they serve.

What policies or systems do you have in place to ensure resources are allocated in ways that ensure all students have access to equitable opportunities?

We have an executive director of equitable resource strategy whose responsibility it is to ensure equitable allocation and management of resources in the areas of finance, operations, and talent management. Some of her current priorities include leading the creation of our Supports Index and our Opportunity Index. In addition to the indexes, her team is also supporting the development of a Teacher Diversity Dashboard which will allow us to track teacher diversity, distribution, and retention. It will also allow us to see where we are placing teachers and ensure that our highest-need students are receiving the best quality teachers.

Our office also works closely with our Finance Division in implementing our Student Success Formula. Our Student Success Formula provides a base amount of funding to each school, supplemented by need-based funding in areas such as poverty, special education, etc. Our office supports the program evaluation component of this work to ensure return on investment and that these supplemental funds are being leveraged in ways that produce results for targeted student populations.

Equity work is heart work and hard work, and change doesn't happen overnight. What keeps you going in this work?

What keeps me going are the students, the principals, the teachers, and the parents and caretakers. I know this sounds cliché, but I am honestly inspired and motivated by them, and I try to build authentic relationships with individuals in each of these stakeholder groups. We have students who have so much potential in them, more than they even realize, and I am motivated by the privilege to provide opportunities and create an organizational culture for this to be realized. And, we have parents and caretakers who want to be connected to our work, and who want to be engaged in meaningful ways. I meet them at the schools, and I run into them at the park or at the store. I can hear their frustration about feeling unheard and unwelcomed. I want to be the catalyst that shifts that culture.

Their experiences resonate with me because they mirror my own experiences as a principal, a teacher, a student, and a mother of three children with intersections across race, learning difference, sexual orientation, and gender identity. My own experiences have given me a unique view into how children can be adversely affected by the intersectionality between educational inequity and marginalization, and so I sympathize with their frustrations and impatience with systems that are creating inequity. I want to leverage my proximity to power to break down those barriers. I also carry with me countless stories of the impact that education can have when it is used as a practice of freedom. The truth of the latter is what drives me to do this work. ♦

¹ Government Alliance on Race and Equity, *GARE Communications Guide* (May 2018), <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/1-052018-GARE-Comms-Guide-v1-1.pdf>.