Central Rivers Area Education Agency Equity Audit Findings

Report prepared by The Leadership Academy

March 2022

Equity Audit Findings – Overview

To gather broad input on the current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion within Central Rivers Area Education Agency (AEA) and to surface learning needs for staff, The Leadership Academy collected stakeholder perspective through focus groups and a survey. **Across 14 focus groups and 186 survey responses, the following themes emerged:**

In what ways does Central Rivers AEA signal that diversity, equity, & inclusion are priorities for the organization?

- The agency's equity committee and their commitment to an equity audit with The Leadership Academy suggest that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities.
- Staff see the agency making a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion through the allocation of resources, such as by providing professional learning on related topics.
- References to diversity, equity and inclusion are included in public statements and in documents such as the strategic plan.
- Some staff do not believe or cannot point to specific evidence that would suggest that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the agency.

How do beliefs, assumptions, and fears about diversity, equity, & inclusion impact the work at Central Rivers AEA?

- Staff avoid discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion for the fear of offending others or saying, "the wrong thing."
- Unrealized and unexplored biases and assumptions impact staff's ability to talk about and address issues of inequity and diversity.
- Some staff do not believe that beliefs, assumptions, and fears about diversity, equity and inclusion are present in the organization.

How can Central Rivers AEA deepen staff understanding of diversity, equity, & inclusion?

- Central Rivers AEA can deepen staff understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion by providing more professional development opportunities and resources.
- Central Rivers AEA should encourage and make intentional space for staff to have conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Central Rivers AEA leadership could be more transparent and vocal about the agency's commitment and efforts to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To what extent are staff having open conversations about race and diversity? What obstacles do staff face in having these conversations?

- Staff are hesitant to discuss race, diversity, and equity due to a perceived lack of skills.
- Staff feel uncomfortable discussing race, diversity, and equity with people they do not have a close relationship with.
- Staff are hesitant to discuss race, diversity, and equity for the fear of having conflict with colleagues or district partners.
- Conversations about race, diversity, and equity within the agency are infrequent.

In what ways does the current allocation of resources communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization?

- Staff expressed that they do not have enough information or insight to know if the current allocation of resources communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the agency.
- The staff who do not believe that the current allocation of resources communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the agency reference a lack of staff diversity as well as needing more resources allocated to making these a priority.
- The staff who do believe that the current allocation of resources communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the agency referenced the equity audit and equity committee, efforts to ask for staff input and feedback, and resources such as mental health services and professional development opportunities.

How are stakeholders asked for their input in how resources are distributed?

- The extent to which staff are asked for their input on resource decisions may vary by department or discipline.
- Not all staff feel involved in the decisions about how resources are allocated.
- Staff do not all know how decisions are made about resource allocation.

What would make Central Rivers AEA a more welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable organization?

- Central Rivers AEA leadership could make a bolder commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Central Rivers AEA could commit to hiring and retaining more staff of color.
- Some staff already experience Central Rivers AEA as welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable.

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Introduction

Headquartered in Cedar Falls, Central Rivers Area Education Agency (AEA) is one of nine Area Education Agencies in Iowa that supports local schools in the areas of Educational Services, Information & Technology, and Special Education. Central Rivers AEA reaches 18 counties and serves over 66,000 students including 53 public school districts and 19 non-public school districts. To help build internal capacity to support their district partners in advancing equity, Central Rivers Area Education Agency (AEA) has partnered with The Leadership Academy.

To gather broad input on the current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion within Central Rivers AEA and to surface learning needs for staff, The Leadership Academy is conducting an Equity Audit. The audit is focused on organizational priorities, professional development needs, infrastructure, and resources.

To establish the current state of equity in these areas, The Leadership Academy, with the cooperation and assistance of Central Rivers Area Education Agency, collected stakeholder perspective through focus groups and a survey. In January and February 2022, a total of 14 focus groups were conducted with 84 internal stakeholders. A parallel survey received 197 responses, with 186 fully completed responses.

The pages that follow provide the high-level findings, reflecting those perspectives raised by a majority of stakeholders. Appendix A provides additional information on the audit process, including a breakdown of the audit phases, and data collection and analysis methodology. Appendix B includes the focus group and survey questions.

Equity Audit Findings

The data and feedback collected through the Equity Audit focus groups and survey reflect the current state of diversity, equity[1], and inclusion within the areas of professional development, infrastructure, and resources within Central Rivers Area Education Agency (AEA). Themes that emerged repeatedly across participants serve as the findings. Some trends are present in both the focus group and survey data, while others may be more present in one data source. Survey responses and excerpts of near-verbatim notes from focus groups are presented (in *italicized*) text to illustrate each theme. Dissenting views, or those that were not expressed by the majority of participants, are also included.

A few notes:

- We recognize the data do not comprise all experiences and events within the organization and are not meant to be comprehensive. The small sample size and specific time period present limitations.

- In addition to eight open focus groups, affinity-based focus groups were reserved for staff who represent or work with specific populations including, those work with or have students with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ staff, staff of color, and those in leadership positions. Due to the small number of staff of color (just seven total staff) and LGBTQIA+ staff, they are jointly referred to as "*minoritized[2] staff*" in this report. This decision is not to minimize their voices but to protect their anonymity.

- While a definition for equity was shared with participants, a consistent theme throughout the data is that staff appear to have varying understandings of what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean. This was named explicitly in participant responses. One participant for example asked, "*do we have a common definition of what these words mean?*" Another asked, "*when we are talking about diversity, are we talking about race, age, physical disability all those things?*" The lack of shared understanding also emerged implicitly, with staff speaking about equity as equity of staff workloads, while others spoke to diversity in terms of the diversity of services offered by the agency.

> *"I don't know if our agency has ever defined what equity is so we can all have a common understanding."*
> – Focus group participant

- Survey questions received a wider range of responses; therefore the top themes tend to represent 10-25% of responses. The variation among topics discussed in the focus groups was smaller, therefore the top themes emerging from this data source tend to represent 50% or more of responses. This may be explained by the nature of responding to questions individually versus responding to questions in a group.

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[1] Equity is defined as each person, regardless of circumstances, is given what they need to thrive and be successful. Equity with a focus on race is emphasized as race intersects with all other inequities, but we recognize that there are disparities among other characteristics and contexts.

[2] The term "minoritized," coined by Michael Benitez Jr., emphasizes what the school systems and other systems within the United States have overtly and covertly done to Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Students of Color. The term refers to the "history of structural and institutional actions that have over time limited access to and led to a lack of presence among students of color in higher education labeled as racially and ethnically different from the norm."

How does Central Rivers AEA communicate that Diversity, Equity & Inclusion are organizational priorities?

As schools in the United States become more diverse, educators and those who support them need to build their capacity to meet the needs of diverse students and families. This audit asked a number of questions related to how Central Rivers Area Education Agency fosters a commitment and understanding of what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean for the agency. To begin, staff were first asked to describe what Central Rivers AEA does (or does not do) to signal that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are priorities for the agency. The following themes emerged:

Equity Audit and Equity Committee: The majority of focus groups (71%) and 15% of survey respondents referenced this equity audit and the agency's equity committee as evidence that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities. Not all staff seemed to be familiar with the work of the equity committee, however. As one participant stated, "*There is an equity group that Dr. Dana Miller leads it within in our agency.* **Not sure exactly what work they are doing** *and if it is shared much within the agency – but know there is an equity group.*"

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"Having the equity committee and ensuring it's inclusive and having an equity statement. Not saying we walk the talk though..."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"By doing this audit it shows staff that the agency is concerned about equity and inclusion."* – Open focus group
- *"We have a newly formed equity team in the agency; it shows that as an agency we are paying attention to it, prioritizing trying to embed equity thinking in all we do."* - Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"Starting the equity focus groups and sending out this survey communicate that equity is important to Central Rivers AEA."*
- *"I think this survey and the fact that people are looking into what kinds of things can demonstrate that it is a priority is a good example."*

Resources and Trainings Provided: The majority of focus groups (71%) and a quarter of survey respondents referenced specific resources, services, or trainings that have been provided by Central Rivers AEA including accessibility trainings and language interpreters. They also mentioned the variety of languages and populations represented in photos and media put out by the agency, including books offered by the media center. According to one focus group participant, "*the media center...they have thousands and thousands of books and videos that you can access regarding race and every culture you can think of.*"

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"I think the AEA does a great job of supporting us with interpreters for meetings ...I think it shows they realize the importance of us being able to communicate and do what we need to do to best serve the kids and parents."* - Open focus group
- *"I recently had to do a training on how to make our web stuff and documents accessible, I think that is a big step toward being more inclusive."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"We have access to an interpreter for Spanish and we are also able to use a language line for families that speak other languages."*

- *"I believe that we have had multiple trainings and discussions over the years that address these issues. Several years ago, we were able to attend Understanding Poverty training with Ruby Payne. The agency has also provided trainings regarding [English Language Learners]."*

Equity Statements: Another way in which focus groups (50%) and survey respondents (18%) see that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the agency is how these terms are included in public statements made on the agency's website and social media, and in documents such as the strategic plan.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"My mind jumped to the equity statement at the bottom of agency email."* - Open focus group
- *"I might be wrong, but I think there is language on the strategic plan that speaks to equity, diversity... I cannot come up with them off the top of my head."* - Open focus group
- *"That the word equity is used frequently as part of our mission, when we talk about our services being equitable. We use that word."* - Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I have seen postings on our website and on social media in regard to CRAEA supporting all ethnic groups and promoting the value of diversity."*
- *"The 5 Year Strategic Plan is an example of language and actions of our AEA where it shows that equity and inclusion are priorities."*
- *"All official media such as letters, websites, brochures, etc. all have the equity statement on them."*

> **"I wonder how CRAEA is living their beliefs, values beyond just a legal statement posted in the footnotes of documents, web pages, etc. In what was does CRAEA demonstrate diversity thinking in their hiring practices (who they hire), promotion of individuals ...."**
> – Survey respondent

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are Not Priorities: Forty-five percent of non-leadership focus groups (5 out of 11) and 15% of survey respondents admitted that they either do not believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities, or that they do not have any evidence to indicate that they are.

Some staff believe that this work is implied, but perhaps not explicitly communicated as a priority. According to one focus group participant, "*It is evident in the work we do because that is what our agency was designed to do... **I'm not sure that it's been said, but it has been implied**.*" This suggests that some staff are removed from any work the agency is doing to address these topics.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"I don't see the AEA pushing that in the school site. There is lots of pressure to please the sight. I don't think it's comfortable to be visibly different."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I'm stuck on the word priority. Not that it's not important, but in terms of being a priority it's hard for me to articulate how the agency does that..."* - Open focus group
- *"I don't know that I've ever heard it said in a blatant way. We have our big rocks (SDI, WB, FR) and underneath that I think they encourage the work we need to do to serve all students no matter who they are or what their background is ...but as far as celebrating the diversity of the folks that work at CR, I don't know that has been as explicit to me."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I hear these terms mentioned frequently but don't know what is done about them.*"

- *"I honestly cannot say I recall ever being a part of conversations or trainings around this topic."*
- *"It could be that they are priorities, but I don't know of any specific messages or initiatives in this area."*

How do beliefs, assumptions, and fears about diversity, equity & inclusion impact Central Rivers AEA's work?

With diversity, equity, and inclusion as newer priorities for the organization, focus group and survey participants were asked about the beliefs, values, assumptions, and fears that impact this work at Central Rivers AEA. The following themes emerged:

Fear of Offending Others: One obstacle elevated by the majority of focus groups (71%) and 11% of survey participants is the fear of offending others or saying the "*wrong thing*," particularly with recent state legislation and the national "anti-CRT" conversation. While most people stated that they feel more comfortable to discuss issues of race and inequity within the organization, others feel "*pressure to please*" their school sites.

Focus group Participants Words:
- *"It's tough, but my personal feelings are that people are almost treading so lightly in the waters. People in Iowa are scared to say anything. It's still a big issue, and there's policies like book bannings that are out of our hands. It's adding to the feeling that it's not acceptable to talk about these things."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"Avoid it because it's sticky.... some of that is because we work in public schools and because of political vibes around what we can talk about within classrooms – we are absorbing that stress from those situations. I would love to be able to talk more about this – but in my work we don't."* - Open focus group
- *"I sometimes feel lost in all of the acronyms and initials... Sometimes I am hesitant because I don't want to make a mistake... I even stumble over do you say black? Do you say African American? What do you say? It's hard to keep up."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"There is a fear of offending a group or individual by words and actions. With the current state of politics, the agency employs people from the entire political spectrum, which brings in a diverse group."*
- *"I believe there is significant fear about discussing equity and diversity given the state's political climate. I am also highly concerned about the number of colleagues who do not understand the importance of DEI and who have limited or no experience with non-Caucasian cultures."*

Unexplored Staff Bias: Another obstacle raised by 57% of focus groups and 21% of survey respondents is the impact that unrealized assumptions and biases can have on the ability to talk about and address issues of inequity and diversity. Participants specifically named "*white privilege*" and "*lack of self-awareness*" as particular obstacles.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"There is a lack of self-awareness from administration down. There's a series of microaggressions that happen on a daily basis. There's talk about 'those kids' and we know 'those kids' are Black students, and it's problematic. People can't even see their own bias and they don't explore it..."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"A large population of our team reps are white, and our bias can impact our work. Our own bias that we don't recognize."* - Open focus group
- *"In Special Education it has consistently been disproportionate, and it feels like there have been more black male individuals needing special education services - especially in the area of behavior. We have been*

making staff aware of that. They may now backup and hesitate a bit… Is this really a disability or a difference in cultural beliefs and actions?" - Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"Due to a limited knowledge of what diversity, equity, and inclusion are, we tend to say that something is more 'equitable', but we are not using the word accurately."*
- *"We all, obviously, have values, assumptions and fears. It's just a matter of whether we recognize that they impact our work."*
- *"I think we likely have a lot of work to do with implicit bias. I worry that when we are identifying students, we are not considering the whole child and their experiences."*

Biases and Fears about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are Not Present: Twenty-two percent of survey respondents stated that because of where they sit and how they experience the organization, they do not believe that biases and fears about diversity, equity and inclusion are present within the agency.
- *"I am not aware of negative fears from others regarding diversity, equity and inclusion impacting someone's ability to be employed or do their job effectively at Central Rivers AEA."*
- *"I feel like the AEA is a very inclusive environment and accepting. I don't have any concerns."*
- *"I have not seen it impact our work at CRAEA. I think we need to be very cognizant in recognizing that if people have different political and faith-based beliefs, they can and do still act professionally and with kindness."*

How Can Central Rivers AEA's Deepen Staff Understanding of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion?

After naming the biases and assumptions that may pose as obstacles to Central River's work to prioritize diversity, equity, ad inclusion, focus group and survey participants were asked how the agency could help deepen their understanding of these concepts. The following themes emerged:

More Professional Development: Participants overwhelmingly asked for more professional development opportunities to deepen their knowledge and skills, including trainings, seminars, book studies, and *"bringing in speakers from different areas and backgrounds."* The majority of focus groups (79%) and 48% of survey respondents asked for support around topics like bias, white fragility, and cultural competence.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"The education and training piece makes sure that we have allies that understand that we need to have these conversations."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I think we need to have training that is very explicit around bias and deeper understandings of gender, sexual orientation, around the impact that that has on children and adults. Race… we tend to gently talk around those things, but we don't have hard conversation with explicit instruction around it."* - Open focus group
- *"We need more than ever the tools to discuss it. We've never talked about cultural race theory and what the law says...We haven't talked about challenges with books all across the state and how we support teachers across the state to have a diverse body of books to expose to other types of stories."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"Commit agency time to trainings that will help me better understand my marginalized colleagues and learn to embrace the discomfort of talking about and tackling tough issues."*
- *"It would be great to continue to be informed on current 'best practice'. What are the terms that are widely accepted as appropriate 'labels'? Is it ok to say the person is black or is it better to say African American? Can you use immigrant and migrant as equal options? These questions are some that I hear often, and I think people want to be respectful but are not sure what to say.*"

→ **Encouraging Conversations:** In addition to professional development opportunities, 50% of focus groups and 16% of survey respondents asked for more intentional opportunities to discuss race, diversity, and other "*tough conversations"* with colleagues in order to create shared understanding and build skills.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"I think we need to engage in the tough conversations and how it impacts everything. We don't change if we are not uncomfortable."* - Open focus group
- *"Practicing would help us have difficult conversations. Using our 4 C's conversation protocol to practice having difficult diversity conversations might help us to use our tools at a higher level. Having those conversations about race are more gray and uncomfortable."* - Open focus group
- "*The more we don't have the conversation the more uncomfortable it gets. It makes me nervous because I don't know what the outcome of the conversation will be. I don't know how people will react or what possible repercussions might be."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"The more conversations we can have around these topics the more understanding we will be."*
- *"Just having more conversations about what we observe regarding inequities within the settings we support would open the conversation about our awareness and help each other be more aware."*

→ **Inform Staff about DEI Efforts:** A little more than one quarter (27%) of non-leadership focus groups (3 of 11) and 18% of survey respondents would like to hear more from agency leadership about the efforts to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"Thinking about how things are communicated within our agency…. I assume a lot of these conversations are happening up top, but it doesn't always flow through to those of us that are out working in districts."* - Open focus group
- *"As with everything, communication... Maybe actions and next steps are taken, but the communication doesn't always trickle down. Sometimes I wonder if the work just isn't seen by all."* - Open focus group
- *"Time to get to know the agency's view, what they've tried or what they are trying."* - Open focus group

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A number of survey respondents reported that they do not need the agency to help further their understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some staff feel they already have the knowledge, while others don't feel that it is the agency's responsibility to provide it.

- *"They don't need to deepen my understanding; I do that independently."*
- *"I feel that I have a good understanding and don't really need anything from the agency concerning these areas."*
- *"I don't think this is Central River's place to provide this for me at this time."*

Survey Participants Words:
- *"Be more transparent about efforts and priorities in these areas."*
- *"Expectations of no tolerance for lack of inclusion/diversity need to be known down to all levels of the work force!"*
- *"Be transparent with the data collected from these surveys and from the committee work so we are all aware of areas in which we need to grow."*

To what extent are Central Rivers AEA staff having open conversations about race and diversity? What obstacles do staff face in having these conversations?

An important step in Central Rivers AEA's equity journey is the ability and opportunity for staff to have meaningful conversations about race and identity. Therefore, focus group and survey participants were asked their level of comfort in having open conversations about these topics as well as the obstacles that may get in the way.

Survey respondents were asked to assess their level of comfort on a 4-point Likert Scale. Shown in Figure 1, **more than half of respondents (52%) reported that they feel comfortable having open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics to "a moderate" extent.**

Figure 1. To what extent are you comfortable having open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics? (n= 184 survey respondents)
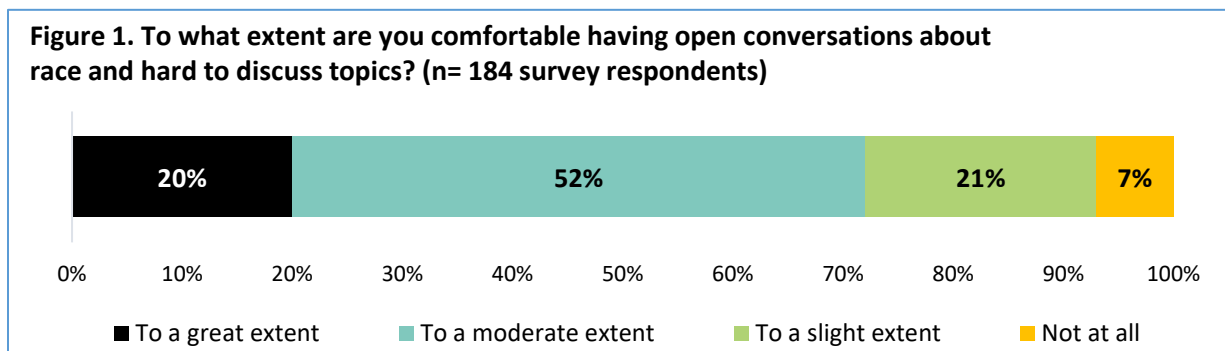
Staff named a number of obstacles they face in having open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics, including a lack of skills or experience, feeling unsafe with colleagues or district partners, fear of offending others or having conflict, and the lack of time and space to have these conversations.

Lack of Skills or Experience: The majority of focus groups (86%) and one-fifth of survey respondents described feeling hesitant to have conversations about race, diversity, and equity due to a lack of skills or experience. Some respondents expressed feeling more comfortable discussing other aspects of identity such as sexual orientation. According to one focus group participant, *"I am more comfortable talking about sexual orientation with someone than I am race."*

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"I think I feel very comfortable, but I don't know if I feel skilled."* - Open focus group
- *"It comes back to a lack of understanding. When it comes to diversity, I am not sure I am capable – I'm not sure it's right… it's lack of knowledge."* - Open focus group
- *"Not having the knowledge to talk about those topics, I feel like I don't have the personal experiences that give me that drive – because I haven't had those experiences."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I think with my lack of experience, I would not know how to approach the topic."*
- *"I struggle with the appropriate language to use. I am scared to talk about race with others in fear of offending someone else, so I really do not talk about it all."*

Dependent on Relationships or Feeling Safe: About three-quarters of focus groups (78%) and 14% of survey respondents described feeling uncomfortable having these conversations with people they do not have a close relationship with.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"It depends on the group. Within some settings and environments, I would feel incredibly safe in my skin speaking openly. In others, not so much just for fear of acceptance or uncertainty of how you deliver it or speak to something. It would matter what the level of safety within the group I was in."* - Open focus group
- *"If I'm comfortable with that person and they know me, I'm less worried. I don't worry about appropriate terminology. But when you are in that other group you get a little more skittish. What's the right way to phrase this? Your pace is a little bit slower."* – Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I feel comfortable within my own regional team and with my own RA. I'm not sure how I would address those topics in settings I support outside of AEA."*
- *"When I am in a space with people I know, I am much more comfortable having discussions about race, bias and systemic racism…There is also a hierarchy within our organization. I would be less likely to engage in a conversation about equity or bias or systemic racism with some leaders in the agency than with people in a similar position."*

Staff noted that they would feel more comfortable having conversations about race, diversity, and equity if there was more trust and psychological safety built among staff, particularly given the size and organization of the agency.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"The agency is so big that it makes it difficult to dig deep into relationships."* - Open focus group
- *"Our work does not allow us to build deeper relationships with our co-workers."* - Open focus group
- *"That safe space to come back to… I don't think we have that."* – Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"My only hesitation is ensuring that a trusting, safe environment is created when the conversations are being held. If that type of environment is not created, then I tend to not participate at a high level."*
- *"It depends upon the safety felt in each group where the conversation is taking place. It is not enough to say, 'this is a brave space'. We must develop relationships with each other so that we can believe we can talk openly."*

Fear of Conflict or Tension: Similar to question two above, 64% of focus groups and 19% of survey respondents raised the fear of offending someone or having conflict and tension with colleagues or district partners. Some also mentioned feeling a certain pressure to represent the agency. As one focus group participant stated, it is *"hard to engage with conversations in schools because **I am representing CRAEA and want to represent in the best way possible** and not degenerate all the good work other folks are doing. Important to me to represent myself and the agency in the best way I can."*

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"It's not because of the agency tells me not to talk about, but I represent the agency, so I am not comfortable expressing my view."* - Minoritized staff member
- *"It's uncomfortable to have conversations with co-workers because I have to keep that working relationship."* - Open focus group
- *"In our agency, those conversations are harder to broach… I think people hesitate to engage, especially higher up in the org. I personally don't feel uncomfortable, but I fear ramifications."* – Minoritized staff

Survey Participants Words:

- *"I just would not want to do something that unintentionally made someone feel uncomfortable or like they were not welcomed to be part of the group or any discussions."*
- *"Fear typically holds me back from having these conversations - fear of making another individual feel bad/offended and not knowing how to approach the topic. I think role playing these types of conversations as an organization could be very helpful."*
- *"There is too much volatility with speaking about these topics. Even though it's something that I am really passionate about, I don't know if I would be supported in the workplace if these topics came up. I only discuss them with other staff if I know them well and know we share the same beliefs."*

DEI Conversations are Limited: Another theme to emerge in the data is that conversations about race, diversity, or equity do not happen with much frequency. According to 57% of focus groups and 26% of survey respondents, these conversations do not take place either because 1) there is not any dedicated time or space to have these conversations within the agency; 2) some feel these conversations "*do not necessarily sound work appropriate;*" or 3) conversations about race are more difficult to have than conversations about other aspects of identity, such as gender or sexual orientation.

Focus Group Participants Words*:*

- *"We just don't talk about it. It's not my job to tell others about someone else's business or buy into others' language. We just don't talk about it."* - Minoritized staff member
- *"Open conversations within the agency need to be fostered within and encouraged from the top. Unless these conversations are encouraged or actively discussed... This gives people the green light... Hey this is ok to talk about at work. Otherwise we have hard lines between personal and professional."* - Open focus group
- *"They're topics you just don't discuss."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"No noticeable obstacles other than limited intentional spaces for these conversations to take place."*
- *"It doesn't seem like there's much space for these conversations, as many of our meetings and opportunities to have conversations are focused on other things."*
- *"I don't see a reason to discuss race/racism at work."*

In what ways does the current allocation of resources (people, funding, time, materials) communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for Central Rivers AEA?

Organizations need committed resources and structures to support equity work and create more equitable working environments. Therefore, this audit asked several questions related to the allocation of infrastructure and resources. Staff were asked to first describe how the current allocation of resources (people, funding, time, materials) communicate that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization and second, what would they like to see change.

Current State

When asked about the current allocation of resources, most staff felt that they did not have enough information to answer the question. Others were split - while some felt that the current allocation of resources did not signal that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization, others did.

Resource Allocation Unknown: The majority of focus groups (86%) and 37% of survey respondents admitted that they are not familiar with how resources are allocated. While this does not directly answer the question, it does suggest that resource decisions need to be made more transparent to all staff.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"I have been here for ... years and I don't know of anything that any resources have been allocated for this topic."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I'm not sure that I have knowledge about how the resources as defined are being utilized. I really don't know."* - Open focus group
- *"When we look at the budget, it's not split out that here are things that support equity or diversity - I have never seen that and so I would have to get more information about that particular application. I assume that we are buying materials… I certainly got that impression. But I don't know what percentage it is."* - Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"I am not aware of specific needs within the agency and/or how the needs are addressed through the allocation of resources."*
- *"I don't know how resources are allocated, so I do not have an opinion."*
- *"I'm not aware that the current allocation of resources takes into account diversity and equity and inclusion. Nor I'm aware that it doesn't take these things into account."*

When asked how the current allocation of resources speaks to equity and inclusion as priorities, a number of participants spoke to distribution of workload among departments and regions:

- *"As far as equity, I would like to see more equal caseloads across the agency…"*
- *"If we're talking about disciplines, more resources need to be put into making job responsibilities more equitable."*
- *"Take a look at workload… and distance to assignments. Some people drive an hour, some drive two minutes."*

Current Allocation Does Not Communicate That DEI Is a Priority: More than two-thirds (69%) of focus groups and 15% of survey respondents report that the current allocation of resources does not suggest that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization. They referenced a lack of needed district resources and needing more time and resources to embed any efforts to make diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities. They also referenced the lack of staff diversity as currently, all but seven staff members identify as White.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"If we're looking at racial equity and supporting LGBTQ communities, we're not allocating resources to it at all, except the equity audit. ...In terms of diversity, we serve individuals with disabilities, yet we don't employ folks with disabilities."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I think that we have so many other initiatives and things that it is easy for us to make statements that this is something we want to think about, but I don't think there is probably very much time that is dedicated to it overall. How much does the allocation of time show that that is a priority? Probably not that much."* - Open focus group
- *"Even as an agency with well over 50% of their staff hired to serve children with disabilities, we probably have a very low percentage of staff that have a disability.... We don't even come close to having the same number of people of color that we have students in our agency ...We have school districts where we have non-English speaking populations of people, and we don't even have the staff who can communicate with the families and the children."* - Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"We don't have enough time and resources to get all the kids seen that need our help, so this I am sure doesn't have enough either."*
- *"I do not think our personnel as a whole demonstrates much diversity. I would say we are made up of mostly (not all) white females."*
- *"Our staff could definitely be more diverse, and we could always offer more trainings on these topics."*

Current Allocation Does Communicate That DEI Is a Priority: On the other hand, one half of focus groups and 28% of survey respondents believe that the current allocation of resources does suggest that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization. They reference the equity audit and equity committee, efforts to ask for staff input and feedback, and resources offered such as mental health services and professional development opportunities as evidence that the agency is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"Dana's position and her expertise that I don't know a ton about… it is valuable and critical. the accessibility learning that we have been doing and the time spent on our professional learning and how to make that accessible, I think are all signs of steps in the right direction."* - Open focus group
- *"Our policies, if you look at the 800 series and what should be provided and what's happening, I feel good that we can lean in on these policies to help us justify that we are making the right decisions for our students and staff."* – Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- "*We have focus groups addressing and identifying ways to progress as an agency. We have a dedicated mental health team.*"
- *"Respectful, open practices of listening to all voices, hiring diverse people (i.e. race, sex, etc.), and resources available to all groups within the agency communicate diversity, equity and inclusion."*
- *"Money is allocated for training. There are staff that work in these areas. The recent focus groups as a priority."*

Desired State

When asked how resources would be allocated if diversity, equity, and inclusion were priorities for the organization, participants would hope to see the following actions:

1) A more diverse Central Rivers AEA staff
   - *"I would like to see more diversity in our staff. We hear we're not getting any applicants. What are we doing to encourage them to apply? Are we out there in places encouraging? Lack of role models is a problem. I would like us to do more."* – Open focus group
   - *"We need to look at attracting a much more diverse population of employees that are going into the communities that we serve. Students and families need to see that the folks working with them actually look like them."* – Survey respondent
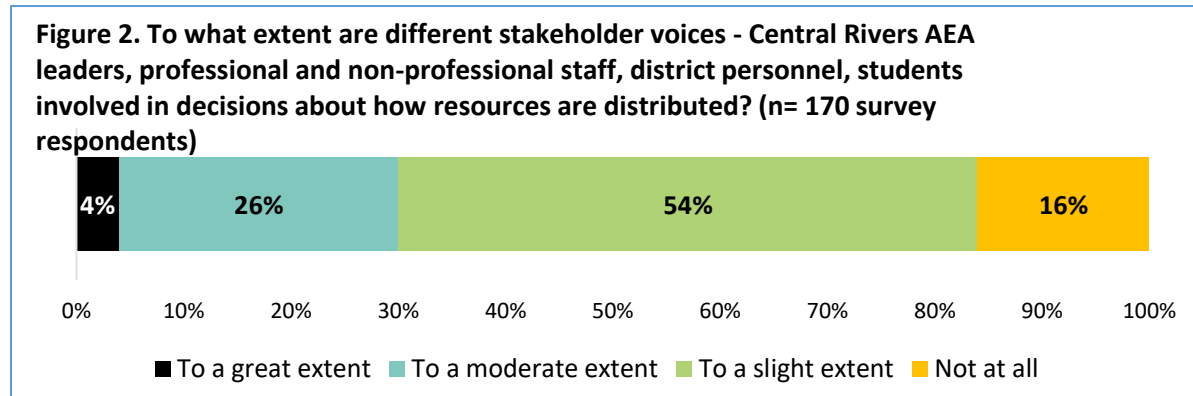
2) More resources dedicated towards DEI efforts
   - *"There are ample opportunities within our agency to reallocate resources to really engage in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I don't think the folks in charge understand how discrepant it really is."* – Minoritized staff member
   - *"We need to shift resources to prioritize equity work. We need an equity coordinator, and it should be a person of color in this role."* – Open focus group
   - "*We have a diversity team and equity coordinator, but if the agency is really going to prioritize this and if they want to think about resources and allocation - building capacity within the agency may be a well-utilized opportunity. Having salaried employees whose job is DEI. We all have different pieces within our roles, so it has to be systemic."* – Open focus group

3) Additional training and resources
   - *"I think something like a required equity training could be great training for our monthly regional meetings or a big training on DEI. If we are going to place an emphasis on this, it would make sense to do that."* – Open focus group
   - *"I would like to see more funding go to translators to help AEA staff communicate with families."* – Survey respondent
   - *"I would like to see more training for our staff around this as well as opportunities for districts to get additional training."* – Survey respondent

How are different stakeholder voices – CRAEA leaders, professional and non-professional staff, district personnel, students – involved in decisions about how resources are distributed?

In addition to how resources are allocated, focus group and survey participants were asked about how decisions about resource allocation are made.

Survey respondents were asked to consider the extent to which stakeholders are asked to be involved in decisions about how resources are distributed. Shown in Figure 2 below, based on a 4-point Likert scale, **the majority of respondents (70%) reported that stakeholder voice is only slightly involved in resource decision**s.

Figure 2. To what extent are different stakeholder voices - Central Rivers AEA leaders, professional and non-professional staff, district personnel, students involved in decisions about how resources are distributed? (n= 170 survey respondents)

4%	To a great extent
26%	To a moderate extent
54%	To a slight extent
16%	Not at all

■ To a great extent ■ To a moderate extent ■ To a slight extent ■ Not at all

Decisions Vary by Department: According to 82% of the non-leadership focus groups (9 of 11) and 7% of survey respondents, the extent to which staff are asked for their input on resource decisions varies by department or discipline.

Focus Group Participants Words:
* *"My team doesn't feel like we have a lot of stake in how resources are distributed. We just say 'okay we will take that.'"* – Open focus group
* *"In my Region, I feel heard. There are people there to support me and help out with what I need as needed."* – Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:
* *"With determining resources for the students served specifically within my discipline."*
* *"Only within my discipline."*
* *"I have a limited budget for materials and professional development. I have seen my discipline have to figure out for ourselves how to serve all buildings and students with the same amount of staff, even if staff reduce their FTE. Although there has been an effort for admin to hear the concerns of my discipline regarding staffing…there has not been transparency about the issues and budget for hiring staff."*

Not All Staff Are Part of the Decision-Making Process: Sixty-four percent of the non-leadership focus groups (7 of 11) and 59% of survey respondents expressed that they do not feel that they are involved in resource decisions. According to some staff, they do not feel that they need to be part of these decisions because they "*trust the ones who are distributing*." Others say they have given input that is then not followed up on.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"The agency would say they engage in shared decision making, including voices in terms of surveys... Realistically, often the decisions are made before collecting stakeholder input, and even if that input counters the decision, it won't matter. Often there's not an acknowledgement that there's a surface effort of engagement in the decision-making process. Often people who don't understand what we're doing to make the decision, and there's little input from others."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I share my input with my supervisor. It is never welcomed. It isn't asked for. It hasn't been acted on."* – Open focus group
- *"We have advocated for more support and resources for years. There is no change or help."* – Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"No and not sure how I would respond. I feel like I would be fine with what administration did with resources."*
- *"Not that I can think of. If we did give our input anyways, nothing would change so it won't matter."*
- *"Not really. Assignments and resources seem to be something we have little control or input on. I would like us to have more say in how PD money is spent, open opportunities for advancement and professional development."*

Sixteen percent of survey respondents indicated that they have been asked to provide their input on certain resource decisions:

- *"Yes, for some types of resources, mainly funding and resources for my discipline."*
- *"Just slightly. I get to request which professional learning I might wish to attend. I get to choose two professional books each year that I wish to have purchased."*
- *"Once in a while we're sent surveys regarding who and how many people would be interested in specific resources. Not asked what resources openly would be beneficial."*

Not All Resource Decisions Are Known: Similar to what was raised in the previous question, participants stated that they do not know how resource allocation decisions are made. According to 72% of the non-leadership focus groups (8 of 11) and 17% survey respondents, the decisions behind how resources are allocated are not known by all staff. Some staff asked specifically for more transparency around this topic.

Focus Group Participants Words:

- *"I would say that decisions are made, and we know the final result, but not informed of how we got there, and we're then left with a feeling that it's often not equitable."* – Open focus group
- *"I don't really understand it. I have asked and it has never been clarified how those decisions are made."* – Open focus group
- *"Every year about this time of year we talk about work assignments, but it does not feel like we are heard. I don't understand or know how those resources are allocated. It's not very transparent."* – Open focus group

Survey Participants Words:

- *"I know nothing about this process. What are the resources allocated? Who makes these decisions and how do they decide?"*
- *"I would need to know more about how resources are currently distributed to answer this and provide specific suggestions."*

What would make Central Rivers Area Education Agency a more welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable organization?

➔ **Making a Clearer Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**: One half of focus groups and 20% of survey respondents would like to see Central Rivers AEA leadership making a bolder commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This would involve a more communication, more actions, and more resources.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"I don't see how our agency support differences. There is nothing that says we are accepting and welcoming. There are no actionable steps."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I think it takes courage and bravery to be really direct as a culture and say these are things that we do to support our staff and things we don't do.... we need to walk the talk and use person-centered language and we need to be conscious and transparent about the words we use."* – Open focus group
- *"It is about prioritizing; I would need more learning and more conversation around diversity and inclusion and how we prepare employees. It can't just be a one stop piece; we need more opportunities for learning."* – Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"More communication from AEA leadership that addresses and illustrates the importance of diversity, inclusion, and equity."*
- *"I wish the agency would find a voice and call to account legislators who attack school districts that work to be inclusive to LGBTQ populations…. When the push is now to ban books that would help build awareness of others, it would seem if the agency was really serious about equity, they would take a stand. AEA Boards and CEOs should come together in a united front and say enough!"*
- *"Model, model, model our priorities. Be very clear with defining welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable. Infuse this theme across the strategic plan explicitly, then model in our way of being."*

> *"I would like to see trainings of staff to help them understand implicit biases. I would like all of us to dig in and understand different perspectives. Learning circles so that we can support and engage with each other. Time to learn from who we serve, like student panels. Digging into the materials, the things that we use, through a culturally responsive lens... Enabling our staff to identify when bias is present, then be active in disrupting them… They don't know what they don't know. The more people experience and work with others that are not like them, the more open they'll be. Exposure is important, and it's also important to not tokenize folks."*
> – Minoritized staff member

➔ **Hiring More Staff of Color**: In addition to making a bolder commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, 43% of focus groups and 18% of survey respondents would like the agency to commit to hiring and retaining more staff of color. While just 1% of Central Rivers AEA staff identify as a person of color, 26% of public-school K-12 students in Iowa identify as a student of color[3].

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"Hiring practices...we don't have diversity...why does it not reflect the diversity?"* – Open focus group
- *"I'd like to see more diversity in our staff. We are a very female, white staff."* – Open focus group

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[3] According to the Iowa Department of Educations, 2021 Annual [Report](), 26.1% of Iowa's Public K-12 students identified themselves as either African American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Two or more races in the 2020-21 school year.

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I think the AEA tries, but it would be great if they could find a way for more diverse hires. It would help the students."*
- *"We don't have a lot of diversity among our staff. It would be nice to try to recruit staff from all races in our direct service roles."*
- *"I think recruiting and hiring people of color would put into action our words."*

Central Rivers AEA Is Already Welcoming & Equitable: Twenty-six percent of survey respondents and 21% of focus groups expressed that they already experience Central Rivers Area Education Agency as a welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable place.

Focus Group Participants Words:
- *"I hear folks expressing it's not a problem for them, so let's not do it, instead of considering other perspectives."* – Minoritized staff member
- *"I have felt very welcomed, very included. I think there is a lot in place in terms of mentoring and helping people identify where resources are. I found all staff to be welcoming. I am not sure what would make it more welcoming or culturally responsive."* – Open focus group
- *"From my vantage point as a Caucasian person, it seems to me that Central Rivers is already very welcoming. I've never seen or heard anything that would make me think we're not culturally responsive or not equitable. I've just never heard that…"* – Leadership focus group

Survey Participants Words:
- *"I feel Central Rivers is very welcoming. The pictures on the wall represent diversity. Our staff represents diversity."*
- *"I feel Central Rivers is welcoming. As an individual who is not a minority, I do not feel I have a good understanding of the concerns others may have."*
- *"I feel that the agency is doing a good job of keeping up on equality issues, allocating resources, and addressing needs and issues as they arise. I have not come across any issues in the work that I do where I feel that an equality or inclusion problem exists."*

Appendix A: Overview of Equity Audit Process

The Leadership Academy's equity audit process enables districts and organizations to diagnose their current state of equity and to identify focal points and strategies for making improvements. The audit process focuses on racial equity because racial inequities are so pervasive in the U.S. and in American schooling. For example, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers, attend under-funded schools and face lower expectations as evidenced by less challenging curriculums (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Black and Latinx students are less likely to attend schools where advanced courses are offered, and when they do, they are less likely to be enrolled in those courses (Patrick, Socol & Morgan, 2020).

Equity audits offer organizations a practical process for developing a more comprehensive and insightful understanding of the problems they are trying to address, which will lead to better strategies and theories of action that promote equity and inclusion (Skrla et al., 2004; Cheatham, Baker-Jones, & Jordan-Thomas, 2020).

The Leadership Academy's audit process is broken up into four distinct phases:

Launch	Capturing the Current State	Root Cause Analysis	Developing a Plan of Action
Process introduced to full committee Collective purpose, goals and focus areas set Committee community building	Data is gathered through focus groups and a survey The Leadership Academy's research team analyzes data and creates a summary report with patterns and trends	Summary report provided to the committee Committee triangulates and unpacks data, uses root cause analysis tools to identify institutional causes Development of a problem statement(s)	Development of a theory of action and action plan based on findings with timeline, responsibilities, and data measure The Leadership Academy prepares a final report based on committee plans
Sept – Dec 2021	*Jan – March 2022*	*March 2022*	*March – April 2022*

Launch: In September 2021, a committee representing a cross-section of internal stakeholders was formed to help lead the work. The committee included the following:

- Keith Halverson, Consultant for Social Studies (co-chair)
- Karl Kurt, Assistant Chief Administrator (co-chair)
- Dana Miller, School Psychologist (co-chair)
- Christin Squier, School Social Worker (co-chair)
- Kandice Bienfang-Lee, School Social Worker
- Bryan Burton, Board Member
- Amber Dietz, Regional Administrator
- Danielle Hakeman, Consultant for Literacy
- MaKenzie Hakeman, Consultant for Mathematics
- Dawn Jaeger, School Social Worker

- Darshini Jayawardena, Board Member
- Amy Knupp, Executive Director of Special Education
- Sam Miller, Chief Administrator
- Jo Prusha, Consultant for Educational Services
- Perla Quintanilla, School Social Worker
- Debra Rich, Board Member
- Rusti Sparks, Special Education Consultant
- Beth Strike, Director of Creative Services
- Contessa Van Buskirk, Communications Specialist
- Kelly Westly, Consultant for Literacy

Leveraging The Leadership Academy's *Non-Profit Equity Continuum,* a tool designed to provide organizations with a means for assessing where they are on their equity journey, the audit committee chose two focus areas:

- **Professional Development** focuses on how the organization fosters ongoing equity learning and growth for its staff and stakeholders.
- **Infrastructure and Resources** focuses on how the organization allocates resources and creates structures to support equity work.

Committee members met between September and December 2021 to develop focus group and survey questions to collect stakeholder perspectives on the chosen key areas.

Establishing the Current State: Insights and feedback were collected across 14 focus groups and a survey in January and February 2022.

Sampling and Data Collection - Focus group questions were created collaboratively between The Leadership Academy and the Central Rivers AEA equity audit committee. A total of 14 focus groups were conducted with the following stakeholder groups:

- One focus group with LGBTQIA+ staff
- One focus group with staff of color
- One focus group with those who support students with disabilities
- Three focus groups with agency leadership (one with board members)
- Eight open focus groups

A parallel survey was administered to gather additional input from stakeholders beyond the focus groups. The survey was distributed online and yielded a total of 186 complete responses.

Data Analysis - Trained note takers took extensive notes during the focus groups. The Leadership Academy's Research & Evaluation team coded these focus groups according to the discussion topic (e.g., focus group guide question), and the themes within each topic. The *Non-Profit Equity Continuum* served as a framework for the analysis. Themes that emerged repeatedly across focus groups and survey responses serve as the findings.

Root Cause Analysis and Development of An Action Plan: After engaging with the summarized data, the equity audit committee will engage in a root cause analysis protocol to further understand why these patterns and trends emerged and ensure proposed strategies are aligned to the real challenges the organization needs to address. Over a series of meetings, through a cycle of inquiry, the committee will develop strategies and action plans to address what was surfaced during the data collection phase.

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Appendix B: Focus Group & Survey Questions

1. In what ways, if at all, does Central Rivers AEA signal that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization? What examples of language or actions help you understand that diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for CRAEA?

2. How do beliefs, values, assumptions, and fears about diversity, equity, and inclusion impact the work at Central Rivers AEA?

3. How could Central Rivers AEA help deepen your understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion?

4. To what extent (from not at all to a great extent), is your level of comfort in having and/or leading open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics (such as discussing bias, systemic racism, other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) within the organization? How about with those you work with and support in schools?
   - What, if any, obstacles do you face in having more open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics within the organization? What would need to change within the organizational culture to encourage more open conversations about race and hard to discuss topics?

5. In what ways, if at all, does the current allocation of resources (people, funding, time, materials) communicate diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities for the organization?
   - How would resources be allocated if diversity, equity, and inclusion were priorities for the organization? What would you like to see?

6. To what extent are different stakeholder voices – CRAEA leaders, professional and non-professional staff, district personnel, students – involved in decisions about how resources are distributed?
   - Have you ever been asked for your input? If not, what might you like to share?

7. What would make Central Rivers AEA a more welcoming, culturally responsive, and equitable organization? What would you like to see or experience that hasn't already been mentioned?

Appendix C: Glossary of Terms

Bias: A form of prejudice that results from our need to quickly classify individuals into categories. (University of Washington)

Culturally responsive organization: A culturally responsive organization effectively meets the needs of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. It involves understanding the societal oppressions faced by various groups of people and creating an environment which centers and affirms the multiple identities of its members. This understanding is reflected in its services, staffing, philosophies, and policies.

Diversity: Diversity encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another, including race, gender, age, religion, language, disability, sexual orientation, ideology, values, etc. (UC Berkely Center for Equity, Inclusion and Diversity)

Equity: Children and adults receive what they each need to achieve their potential, and their race, culture and other characteristics of their identity should not prevent access to opportunities and resources (The Leadership Academy)

Ethnicity: A social construct that denotes groups that share a common identity-based ancestry, language, culture and values. It is often based on beliefs and customs as well as memories of migration or colonization. (Center for the Study of Social Policy).

Inclusion: A state of belonging, when persons of different backgrounds and identities are valued, integrated, and welcomed equitably as decision-makers and collaborators. Inclusion involves a sense of coming as you are and being accepted, rather than feeling the need to assimilate. (Center for the Study of Social Policy).

Minoritized: Emphasizes what the school systems and other systems within the United States have overtly and covertly done to Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Students of Color. The term was coined by Michael Benitez, Jr., to refer to the "history of structural and institutional actions that have over time limited access to and led to a lack of presence among students of color in higher education labeled as racially and ethnically different from the norm." The term is meant to build a "more critical understanding of how 'minority' came to be constructed socially over the course of history and how students continue to be minoritized in contemporary spaces of higher education."

Race: A term used to artificially divide individuals into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical traits (skin color, hair texture, facial features), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, or history (Pacific University)

Racial inequity: Two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing (Ibram X. Kendi)

Systemic Racism: Also known as structural racism, it is the overarching system of racial bias across institutions and society. These systems give privileges to White people resulting in disadvantages for People of Color. (University of California - Marymount)