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Pursuing Racial and Ethnic Equity and Inclusion

A Deep-End Evaluation Feature Brief

Leah Sakala

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Although the number of youth in out-of-home placements has dropped dramatically over the past decade, racial and ethnic disparities in youth incarceration have increased (Rovner 2016). As a result, the lasting consequences of juvenile justice (JJ) system involvement disproportionately affect youth of color.¹ Some JJ reform efforts, therefore, emphasize racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) in addition to reducing general justice system involvement. In this brief, we describe findings from a developmental evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's (the Foundation's) expansion of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative® to the deep end of the JJ system. The Foundation's deep-end reform aims to safely and significantly reduce the use of out-of-home placement for youth, especially youth of color. The findings build on those presented in *Keeping Youth Out of the Deep End of the Juvenile Justice System: A Developmental Evaluation Overview of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Deep-End Reform*, which provides an overview of the evaluation (appendix A provides details about the methods used). Qualitative and quantitative data collection occurred between April 2014 and August 2018.

In the sections that follow, we discuss why REEI is a central component of deep-end reform, present an overview of the types of REEI activities sites have pursued, and reflect on how sites' REEI work might inform similar efforts in other jurisdictions.

BOX 1

Key Findings

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to REEI; stakeholders must apply strategies relevant for their context, and take the unique challenges and opportunities in each jurisdiction into account.
- Sites' strategies for advancing REEI included activities to build awareness and culture change, support data collection and system analysis, and advance policy and program changes to increase equity and inclusion.
- Staffing strategies can affect the success of REEI initiatives; strong leadership and staff buy-in are both key to advancing REEI goals.
- Collaborating with [youth, families, and community members](#), as well as organizations outside the JJ system, is essential for advancing equity and inclusion goals.
- The experience of deep-end sites offers the following considerations for other jurisdictions seeking to pursue similar efforts:
 - » Conversations about REEI can be sensitive, and trust-building among participants can require patience and persistence.
 - » Collecting and reporting data disaggregated by race and ethnicity can help catalyze and advance REEI conversations and measure progress.
 - » Strong leadership and strategic staffing can facilitate culture change and progress on REEI outcomes.
 - » Communicating about REEI work with a wide range of stakeholders across the JJ system and the broader community can foster a sense of collective responsibility.

Why Address REEI as Part of Deep-End Reform?

Youth justice system involvement, particularly when it involves out-of-home placement, carries lasting consequences. Young people generally achieve better outcomes when they receive services in their own communities and have as limited contact with the justice system as possible (Bonnie et al. 2013). Furthermore, youth of color are disproportionately pulled in to the JJ system, experiencing higher rates of arrest, detention, and out-of-home placement than white youth (NCSL n.d.). National data show that these disparities have increased even as the number of youth in out-of-home placements has fallen in recent years (The Sentencing Project 2016). Developing strategies to advance REEI and expand diversion opportunities and community-based supports, therefore, has surfaced as a key priority for some JJ system reforms.

The Foundation's goals for REEI include increasing equity, defined as fairness and justice, and inclusion, which involves "authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging" (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014, 5). Though these goals are related, sites used various strategies for each. The messaging and technical assistance (TA) that the Foundation provided sites, as well as publicly available materials on REEI, emphasize the importance of advancing both equity and inclusion. To advance equity,

the Foundation requires that sites disaggregate system assessment [data](#) and [performance metrics](#) by race and ethnicity. This approach allows stakeholders to understand and diagnose the source and scope of racial and ethnic disparities, and to measure progress as they work to increase fairness. Inclusion strategies emphasize [engaging youth and families](#) to help develop and advance system reform and to serve as key partners in individual case planning.

The Foundation has made REEI a core component of deep-end reform since its inception. The mission of deep-end reform to “safely and significantly reduce the use of out-of-home placement for youth, especially youth of color” explicitly includes REEI as a primary goal. Furthermore, although the Foundation required that sites interested in pursuing deep-end work share a commitment to advancing REEI, it recognized that sites came to the reform with varying familiarity and experience with equity and inclusion work. Moreover, the focus of deep-end reform on REEI has increased. Beginning with the Foundation’s deep-end conference in 2016, REEI has been a primary focus of in-person deep-end convenings and intersite TA calls.

What Activities Did Sites Pursue to Advance REEI?

In this section, we first explain sites’ varied amounts of prior experience with REEI. We then present a three-level analytical framework that the evaluation team developed to describe the depth of REEI activities. Lastly, we discuss the types of activities pursued across all three levels of the framework.

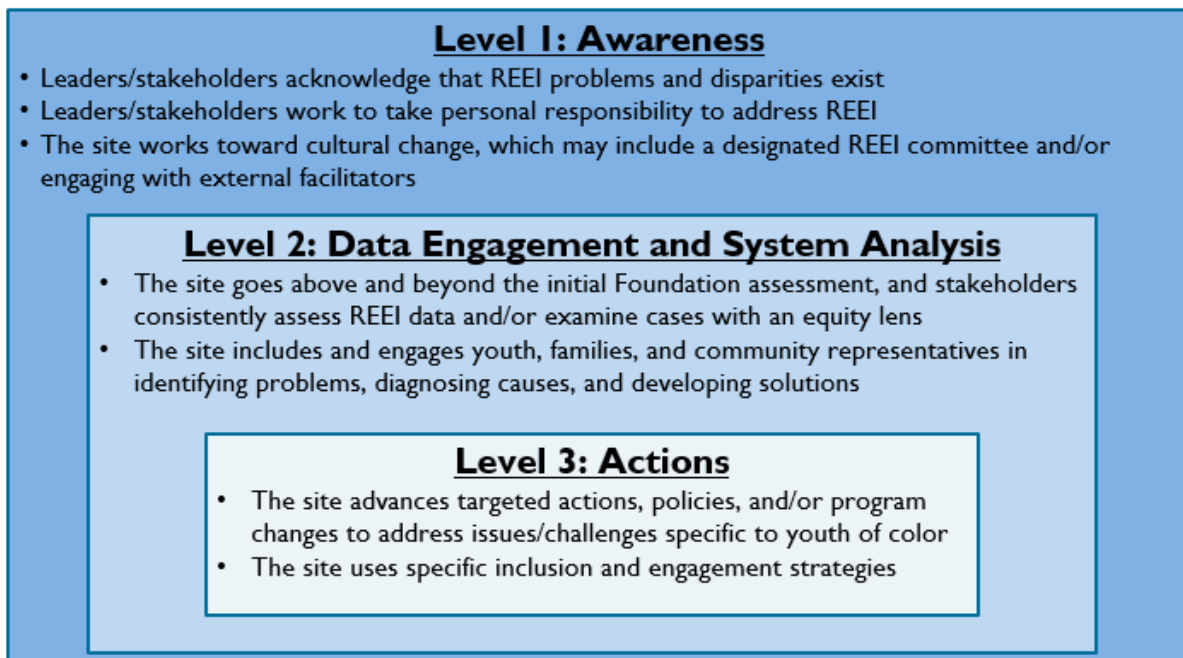
Sites’ amount of prior experience with REEI work influenced how they chose to focus on advancing REEI within deep-end reform. Whereas stakeholders in some sites had already been engaged in REEI efforts that they built on with their deep-end work, others were newer to REEI concepts and focused their REEI efforts primarily on providing education to garner staff buy-in. Nearly all sites formed a deep-end working group or subcommittee to focus on REEI, although some predated deep-end work because they were created as part of the sites’ Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative work. These committees’ levels of engagement and activity varied across sites.

I’ve shifted my perspective over the years. In the beginning, I was more about, ‘How do we change the policies and practices to have more equitable outcomes?’ I’ve shifted...to working with staff to engage them to work with kids and families in a different way in addition to the policies and practices. We’re working on creating a more antiracist multicultural institution in general, and the rest of the stuff will come.

—Site stakeholder

Using a data-driven approach, the evaluation team created a conceptual framework to understand deep-end REEI activities and goals along three levels of reform: awareness of REEI, data engagement and system analysis, and actions (figure 1). Sites worked to advance REEI in various ways, sometimes working on multiple levels simultaneously. A subset of sites engaged in activities at level three, developing and implementing targeted actions to address disparities and increase inclusion and engagement with youth of color and their families and communities.

FIGURE 1
Evaluation Analysis Framework for REEI



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Notes: The deep-end evaluation team developed this framework based on analyses of data pertaining to REEI activities in sites. Although progress at lower levels can facilitate progress at higher levels, some sites engaged on multiple levels simultaneously.

Level 1: Activities to Increase REEI Awareness

Though willingness to engage in REEI work was a central requirement for sites pursuing deep-end reform with the Foundation, sites' receptivity and commitment to moving it forward varied. Some sites newer to REEI work focused on building a shared understanding of REEI and support for REEI among JJ system staff. This included sharing information about best practices, historical context, and terminology to lay the groundwork for productive REEI discussions. As one deep-end stakeholder reported, "The goal is to lay the foundation to help them make more meaningful policy changes in the future."²

Stakeholders reported that this process required a culture change among staff in some JJ agencies, which presented challenges. For example, some stakeholders resisted REEI activities because they did not believe their systems were unfair or that structural racism—which the Foundation defines as “the

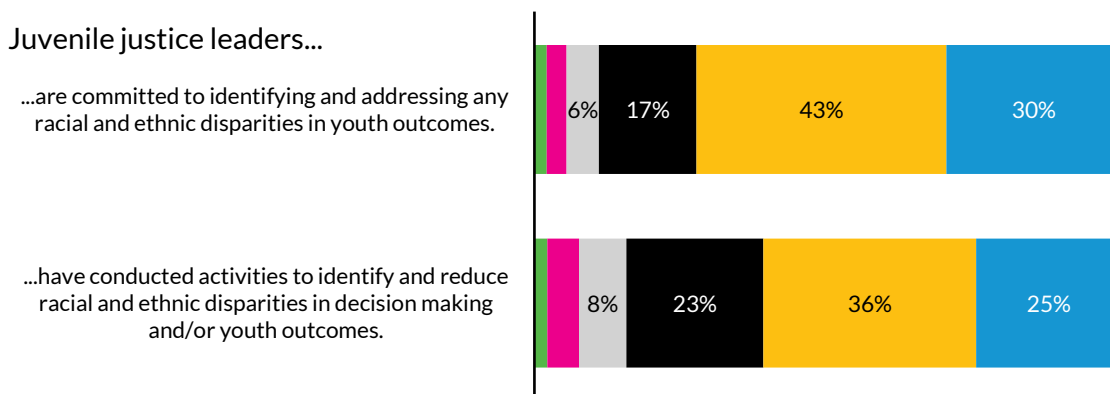
cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color” (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014, 5)—affected youth outcomes. This resistance led to tension when it directly contrasted with community members’ views, creating additional challenges for REEI work in some sites. Other stakeholders reported that they thought REEI efforts should focus primarily on law enforcement practices and other upstream justice system processes (such as school referrals) that they felt determine who becomes justice involved. One strategy sites used to contend with this resistance was education—including looking at system data disaggregated by race and ethnicity—to illustrate disparate outcomes in their JJ system and to help staff understand their roles in advancing REEI.

Though deep-end stakeholders reported that leaders were committed to advancing REEI goals, survey data show that this did not necessarily translate to action among JJ agency staff. Across sites, nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of respondents to a 2018 survey of deep-end stakeholders (including staff from community-based agencies, court administrators, judges, magistrates, prosecutorial staff, and detention staff) agreed or strongly agreed that “juvenile justice leaders are committed to identifying and addressing any racial and ethnic disparities in youth outcomes” (figure 2). The same survey suggested that acting on this commitment was perhaps more challenging in some sites, with 61 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that “juvenile justice leaders have conducted activities to identify and reduce racial and ethnic disparities in decision making and/or youth outcomes.” Involving all staff across JJ agencies can be another obstacle. A 2018 survey of probation officers and supervisors in deep-end sites found that 44 percent reported never, rarely, or occasionally talking with other probation officers and supervisors about possible racial and ethnic disparities in probation violations or probation supervision or other probation decisions and practices. These results indicate that ongoing work is necessary to translate leadership commitment to REEI into practice among JJ staff throughout agency ranks.

FIGURE 2

Survey Respondents' Agreement with Statements about Juvenile Justice Leadership on REEI

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Slightly Disagree ■ Slightly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree



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Notes: Data were collected in 10 sites (Bernalillo County, Camden County, Hennepin County, Jefferson Parish, Lucas County, Marion County, St. Louis City, Pierce County, Ramsey County, and Summit County) via the Stakeholder Survey of Juvenile Probation Policies and Practices (summer to fall 2017; n=242; 79 percent response rate). These statistics omit 65 probation staff from the survey responses because similar statistics for probation staff, calculated from a different survey, are shown separately.

The Foundation provided training and intensive TA to sites seeking to increase awareness about REEI. For sites beginning their REEI conversations, TA focused on educating stakeholders to prepare them to take action. One tool the Foundation used to increase awareness of REEI is a “highway” framework that illustrates how progressing deeper into the JJ system is associated with increasing racial and ethnic disparities and offers opportunities for sites to identify “exit ramps” to shift youth away from the system at each point. In addition, sites reported that having access to Foundation convenings and conferences was helpful for fostering REEI awareness. These avenues allowed the Foundation to communicate the importance of REEI work and created opportunities for site-to-site peer learning about REEI concepts and strategies.

The Foundation also engaged several external TA providers to help sites reach specific goals related to REEI awareness. For example, it contracted with Justice for Families, a national organization run by families directly impacted by the justice system, to support sites by facilitating family engagement trainings and offering guidance about REEI. Some stakeholders reported that having access to external TA providers emphasized the importance of REEI work, and that bringing in a third party to initiate and facilitate often challenging conversations about racism and inequity was valuable. Stakeholders also emphasized the value of TA that was tailored to meet them where they were in their REEI work and to address specific priority topics or stakeholder groups.

BOX 2

Site Spotlight: Case File Reviews

Lucas County, Ohio, reviewed case files to identify opportunities to address inequities in the JJ system. This helped deep-end stakeholders identify which youth were disproportionately entering the JJ system. As one person described, “What the case file review will do is to get people to think about race, equity, and opportunities across the files...This has taken some time, but there is now a readiness to ‘go there.’” After the review, stakeholders presented findings to judges and the administrative team to inform ongoing reform discussions.

Level 2: Activities to Support Data Use and System Analysis Related to REEI

Using [data](#) and other information to assess current practices and identify opportunities to improve REEI is a central component of deep-end reform. Though all sites are required to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity as part of both the initial system assessments and in required annual performance measure reports, some sites pursued additional opportunities to gather, analyze, and use information about justice system disparities. Activities sites took on to support data use included systematic case file reviews, developing and sharing new performance measures to track progress, and implementing regular internal reporting practices. The juvenile court in Summit County, Ohio, for example, generates an extensive report each month, shared with all staff, that includes metrics on case processing and decisionmaking by race and ethnicity. In the evaluation’s framework, these types of activities are categorized as level-two activities.

Stakeholders reported that analyzing data using a racial equity lens proved useful, and some reported that data can be helpful for beginning discussions about REEI. For example, the process of analyzing and interpreting data disaggregated by race and ethnicity can be a stark reality check for people who resist the REEI message and doubt the existence or prevalence of racial and ethnic inequities. Moreover, others reported that having access to disaggregated data allowed them to better understand the drivers of inequality, develop ways to address them, and monitor their progress. As one stakeholder described, “What has been most valuable is seeing our work have an impact on our data and seeing that evidence in our numbers.”

Implementing data systems and processes focused on REEI strategies throughout an agency can require targeted efforts. A 2018 survey of probation staff in deep-end sites found that 50 percent reported never, rarely, or occasionally reviewing data about possible racial or ethnic disparities in violations of probation and other supervision decisions. Some stakeholders reported challenges with gathering and processing data disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Others reported that developing ways to effectively share and focus staff attention on REEI data could be difficult. To address this challenge, the Foundation provided TA to help sites develop REEI data and analysis strategies, offering guidance on which metrics to collect and how to interpret and share data trends.

Level 3: Activities to Support Action on REEI

Although most sites incorporated broad REEI goals in their deep-end work, fewer pursued actions, policies, or program changes specifically targeted at increasing equity and/or inclusion. Some stakeholders reported that they had not reached a point in their deep-end work where they were ready to engage in targeted activities to explicitly advance REEI goals. Furthermore, some sites performed activities that could advance REEI (e.g., programs that engage families in court processes), but that stakeholders did not describe as part of their REEI strategy.

Some sites focused REEI actions on increasing equity by strategizing to reduce the number of youth of color in the deep end of their justice systems. Some created new processes to interrupt the path to deep-end involvement (see the site spotlight in box 3 on the Stress Pass program in Bernalillo County, New Mexico). Others developed supportive programming tailored to meet the needs of youth of color. Lucas County, Ohio, established a restorative justice program, Circles and Verses, designed to serve youth of color and resolve conflicts outside the traditional justice system.

BOX 3

Site Spotlight: Stress Pass Program

Bernalillo County, New Mexico, created a program to decrease rates of supervision violations for absconding by identifying a safe location where youth on supervision can go if they need to leave their homes. This program, which a youth conceptualized, was designed to address the high rates of detention for absconding among Latino youth.

Furthermore, Pierce County, Washington, also took this targeted services approach. There, deep-end leadership developed a Pathways to Success program in 2015 to provide wraparound services to Black boys ages 15 and younger who are on probation supervision, as well as supports for their families.

BOX 4

Pathways to Success Program

Pierce County, Washington, developed a Pathways to Success wraparound service program to support Black youth on probation who are assessed as being at moderate to high risk of recidivism. This program includes evaluations with risk and needs assessments, monthly meetings with a juvenile probation counselor and care coordinator, frequent meetings with a mentor from a community-based agency, support from an education advocate, and the option to receive support from a parent partner.

Sites also pursued inclusion goals by developing [family and youth engagement strategies](#). For example, the Pierce County Pathways to Success program advanced inclusion by offering caregivers an opportunity to engage with the wraparound care team and receive support designed specifically for parents. As one stakeholder explained, “It’s important to engage people with lived experience. The biggest thing about Pathways is that families felt heard. At the ending session [of the program], they feel like they were in a team, not going it alone. The team approach is really a big part of deep end.” Pierce County also incorporated family engagement in its deep-end work by creating a more formal structure: a family council. The council is run in partnership with a community-based agency that serves parents, and membership includes youth with prior court involvement, family members, and court staff. The council is tasked with reviewing and advising deep-end reform efforts related to probation.

Considerations for Other Jurisdictions: What Can Communities Interested in Advancing REEI Learn from This Evaluation?

Sites’ experiences suggest that cultivating a strong commitment to REEI work can advance broader system improvement by building and reinforcing community partnerships, catalyzing more effective data use, and inspiring stakeholders to improve practice in JJ systems. They also show there is no one-size-fits-all approach to REEI work. Each site faced unique challenges and opportunities, and stakeholders’ experiences offer considerations for other jurisdictions seeking to pursue similar efforts.

Conversations about REEI can be sensitive, and building trust among participants can require patience and persistence. Many site stakeholders in and outside of JJ agencies lacked extensive experience using an REEI lens before taking on deep-end work. Negative interpersonal interactions can derail nascent REEI efforts, and spending time cultivating trust among participants can make discussions more productive. Some sites chose to first hold internal conversations about REEI with staff from the juvenile court and, if different, the lead JJ agency. These conversations established a familiarity with REEI concepts and issues and laid a conceptual foundation, both of which were important to establish before engaging the broader community in REEI discussions. Multiple forms of supports and TA can facilitate this process, including staff trainings and workshops, opportunities to attend conferences and learn from other sites, and access to resources such as the Foundation’s publications and frameworks.

If we had to do it over again...we have an equity team now that is tied to our agency's desire to be multicultural, inclusive, and antiracist. That trickled into how we work with each other, how we work with our families, etc., and I think it would be more powerful to think about approaching disparities at a systematic, agency level, rather than department. Kind of macro versus micro.

—Site stakeholder

Collecting and reporting data disaggregated by race and ethnicity can help catalyze and advance REEI conversations and measure progress. Stakeholders across sites stressed the importance of having the right information to identify areas for improvement and set REEI goals. Some sites found that using data to start REEI conversations made it easier for stakeholders to recognize the prevalence and magnitude of their systems' disparities and helped focus attention on system-level improvements rather than individuals' personal opinions or judgements. Monitoring data trends helped stakeholders track their progress and alter activities to course correct as needed.

Strong leadership and strategic staffing can facilitate culture change and progress on REEI outcomes. Sites' experiences suggest that staffing strategies can affect the success of REEI initiatives. Sites reported that strong leadership commitment to REEI work also helped them move forward with fostering internal cultures that value REEI. Strong leadership, though, was insufficient to drive change without broader staff buy-in. One strategy some sites used to foster broader culture change was to recruit and hire staff who are receptive to or aligned with REEI goals. Furthermore, having some staff in JJ agencies whose identities and backgrounds reflect—and are connected to—the communities they serve can facilitate progress toward REEI goals, particularly building the trust necessary to advance inclusion.

Communicating with a wide range of stakeholders across the JJ system and the broader community about REEI work can foster a sense of collective responsibility. Because drivers of systemic inequities are diffuse inside and outside of the justice system, partnerships are critical for addressing REEI. Sites that progressed to advancing specific policies or programs to address REEI did so in collaboration with community organizations, youth and families, and other stakeholders. Several deep-end leaders emphasized the need to be transparent about deep-end work, including clearly articulating REEI goals to the broader community. Intentional public communication strategies can help educate the community about how REEI work can facilitate broader public safety goals.

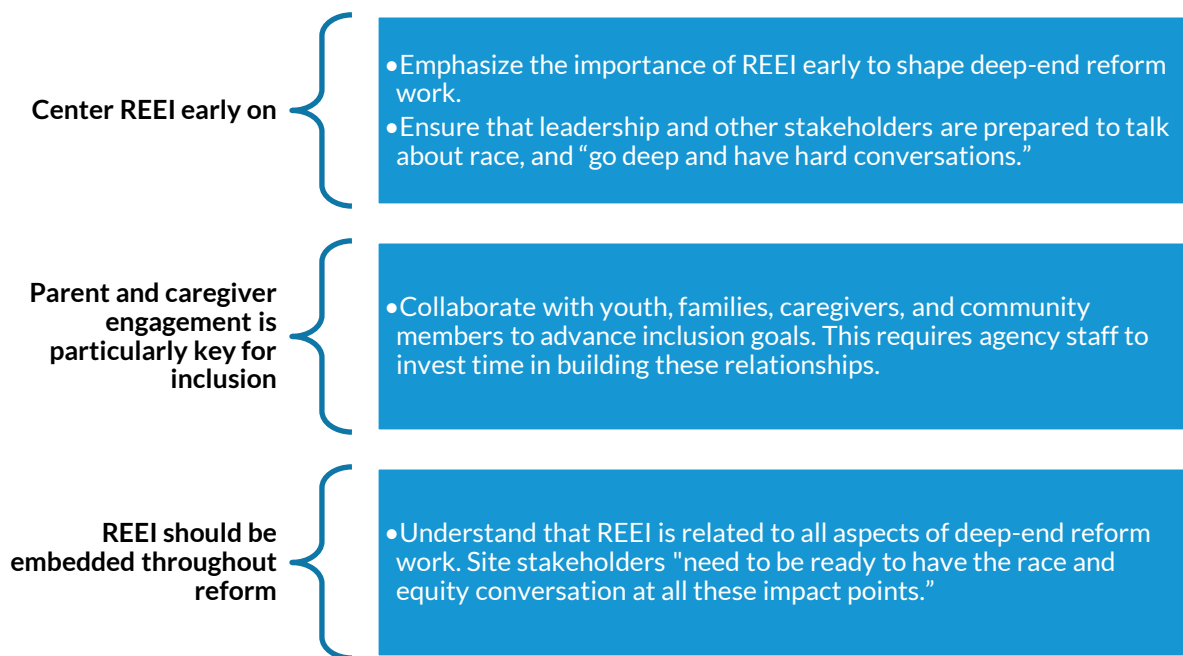
Collaborating with community members outside of the justice system is essential for advancing inclusion. Youth, families, and community representatives are key partners in identifying obstacles to REEI and developing solutions. However, successful collaborations to advance REEI require establishing a common understanding of the most pressing priorities and developing a shared vision for how reforms will serve youth of color. Collaborations require investing time in building a base level of trust among

partners, particularly if there are barriers related to confronting personal feelings and biases or addressing systemic issues.

What Advice Did Sites Have for Stakeholders Considering REEI Reform?

Stakeholders offered the evaluation team insights on the strategies they believed fostered success with REEI and the challenges they encountered. Those insights are shown in figure 3 below.

FIGURE 3
Stakeholder Insights Related to Racial and Ethnic Equity and Inclusion



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Notes

- ¹ See, e.g., the Alliance of National Psychological Associations for Racial and Ethnic Equity's 2019 report, *The Color of Justice: The Landscape of Traumatic Justice*.
- ² Quotes from stakeholders throughout this brief are drawn from interviews or open-ended comments from surveys of stakeholders conducted by the evaluation team, August 2014 to August 2018.

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About the Author

Leah Sakala is a senior policy associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her work includes collaborating with policymakers and advocacy organizations to advance reform and transformation, evaluating the impacts of criminal and juvenile justice policy change, and supporting strategies to build effective community-based systems for safety, healing, and accountability. She has over a decade of experience conducting research and analysis to inform local, state, and national safety and justice policy conversations. Before joining Urban, she was a senior policy analyst at the Prison Policy Initiative.

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500 L’Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

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