Abstract: Rhetoric emphasizing schools’ role in reducing racial and socioeconomic inequality is prevalent in districts as well as in state and federal policy. Much of this rhetoric assumes that teachers will conduct the work of reducing inequality, but the process by which teachers act to facilitate this is not well understood. To make progress in closing gaps, teachers likely need to believe that doing so is valuable, feel that they can make a difference, and be willing to make tradeoffs in pursuit of equity goals. Surprisingly, we know little about educators’ attitudes about achievement gaps. This talk provides a framework for considering multiple dimensions of educators’ beliefs about inequality—distinguishing a focus on individual differences between high and low achieving students from a focus on structural inequality patterned along socially important lines—and discusses novel measures we created for assessing these beliefs and attitudes. We contribute to a greater understanding of attitudes about inequality with a descriptive analysis of survey data we collected in a major urban school district. We find that teachers overwhelmingly view gaps as important, but they vary considerably in the types of gaps they prefer to address, in their beliefs that they can make a difference, and in their willingness to endorse strategies that would advance equity goals in practice. Analyses indicate that attitudes about inequality are multidimensional, and that beliefs that inequality is important do not necessarily translate into endorsing strategies or making choices that would reduce the structural inequality that is a rhetorical and sociological priority. The talk highlights the measures, their multidimensionality, and their significance for the broader landscape of educational inequality.

Bio: Jane Rochmes is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Stanford School of Education and Center for Education Policy Analysis. She received her M.A. in Sociology and Ph.D. in Public Policy and Sociology from the University of Michigan (2014), where she was also a trainee in social demography at the Population Studies Center. She received her B.A. in Sociology from Rice University (2006). Jane’s research integrates interests in social context, stratification, and education. She is particularly interested in how aspects of schooling perpetuate or ameliorate racial and socioeconomic inequality. Her dissertation drew inspiration from personal accounts of so-called “transformational” schools—where students of color and from low-income families perform far better than their social background predicts—to examine whether beliefs among teachers of empowerment to overcome student disadvantages are a key aspect of school success among students and schools more broadly. Another project studied how provision of preventive and physical health services on school campus relates to adolescents’ academic performance, especially for disadvantaged students. Jane also has been conducting research to examine the effects of attending a for-profit college versus other types of college attendance on degree receipt and labor market outcomes.