

COME TOGETHER FOR **EQUITY**

REWORK BELIEFS, ACTIONS, AND SYSTEMS
THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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The word “equity” is found throughout U.S. schools today — in district mission statements, school vision documents, and classroom posters. It is used to signify a value that feels fundamental to our democracy and public education system: Students’ educational outcomes should not be determined by their demographics, including race, ZIP code, primary language, gender, and/or disability. Yet equity can feel elusive in practice.

Education stakeholders who aim to advance equity in practice might approach this work from different fronts. Policymakers and district administrators might focus on providing all students with access to

quality educational resources, including high-quality school facilities, teachers, curriculum and instructional materials.

Local agencies and school partners might concern themselves with improving all students’ readiness to learn, for example, by addressing disparities in health care, post-natal services, early childhood education, physical and mental health services, and parent education.

But school-based educators — including both administrators and teachers — have a uniquely indispensable role that only they can play in advancing equity.

This is because, regardless of whether schools have managed to secure quality educational resources or

receive students who are ready to learn, it is the job of educators to identify the unique starting place of each student and make instructional decisions that will take students to where they need to be, all while cultivating their individual passions and talents.

Doing this well requires ongoing inquiry of one’s own beliefs, an ever-expanding repertoire of professional practices, and constant collaboration to develop student-centered systems. It requires a strategic approach to professional learning.

There is no more important time to commit to investing in professional learning for equity. On issues of race, where national disparities persist, we have a particular responsibility for

sustained dialogue and action. This historic reality converges with this moment in time, in which we are experiencing an uptick in public acts of racism (Anti-Defamation League, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Educators have a unique and essential role to play in growing a generation of citizens equipped to think critically; act with truth, kindness, confidence, and tact; and transform the systems that reinforce inequity.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF EQUITY

At its best, professional learning for equity supports educators to attend simultaneously to three dimensions: beliefs, actions, and systems.

BELIEFS

The deep-seated beliefs and assumptions we develop are comfortable to us, and we depend on them to keep us psychologically safe. We resist changing them, and yet it is impossible to improve actions in lasting ways without first exploring these underlying beliefs.

Because we are both participants in and producers of inequitable systems in ways we may not even realize, a commitment to advancing equity requires us to keep revisiting our beliefs and continually question how we may be stopping short of the belief that all students can learn, as evidenced in our actions.

ACTIONS

Teaching is complex work, requiring teachers to make hundreds of decisions every hour. We manage

this complexity by developing routines. Having these routines allows some of our actions to run on autopilot, which is helpful as it frees part of our minds and bodies for decisions that require more of our attention.

On the other hand, relying on routines reinforces patterns of behavior, at the individual and collective level, until we no longer question our actions, even when we should. A commitment to advancing equity means that we bring our actions in line with our belief that all students can learn. When we change our actions, we recognize ways in which our systems, designed for outdated actions, also need to be reconfigured.

SYSTEMS

Systems are made up of interconnected beliefs, practices, people, organizations, policies, and structures. Our beliefs about what is possible and the actions we choose to take can feel as though they are limited by existing systems, which have longstanding inequities built into them. Ironically, the same beliefs and actions that are constrained by these systems have helped to shape them. It makes sense, then, that while we're working individually and collectively on our beliefs and actions, we are compelled to take action to transform these systems.

Ideally, educators can develop these three interdependent dimensions with intentionality and in concert. If we expand only what we believe, the existing system will limit what we are able to do and leave us frustrated. If we change only what we do, our beliefs will continue (consciously or

not) to reinforce existing systems and limit the effectiveness of our actions. Changing only our systems is equally futile, as what we do in those systems will be shaped by stagnant beliefs and habits, and thus result in no real change. Efforts to expand or change one dimension can only be lasting in the context of congruous changes in the others over time.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Educators concerned with designing professional learning for equity might wonder where and how all three of these dimensions of learning might happen, given the limited time and resources in schools.

In fact, these interdependent dimensions can be developed across multiple professional learning contexts, from independent inquiry to team learning to whole-school professional learning (Gleason & Gerzon, 2013). Thus, while educators may need to establish some new routines, schools can also gain ground by applying or sharpening the equity focus across existing routines. The following examples illustrate how the three dimensions of learning may look in action throughout the school.

Beliefs: To expand thinking about beliefs, educators may independently interview students and their families and check their assumptions against what they've learned. Educators may also form their own critical friendships for exploring how personal biases are playing out in and out of the classroom.

Within school teams, educators

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR EQUITY: 3 DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR EQUITY

BELIEFS:

MINDSETS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Educators might pursue the following objectives ...

On their own:

- Examine **personal beliefs and biases**; develop skills to explore and question them.
- Learn about **students** (race, class, culture interests, learning modes, etc.), their families and neighborhoods; engage them as partners in improving teaching and learning.
- Examine one's own **relationships**; broaden them.

In teams:

- Set and communicate **high, specific expectations**; share collective accountability for them.
- Share **knowledge about shared students** to support colleagues in expanding their view of a student beyond their own classroom; collaborate to understand how cultural considerations affect how individuals and groups of students respond to instructional and assessment contexts.
- Build trust and **authentic relationships** with team colleagues and families; recognize and maximize benefits of diverse backgrounds and work styles.

As a whole school:

- Study **how trust is built** and its important role in relationships (with colleagues, students, and families); take action to strengthen relationships.
- Explore how **existing school and district norms and culture** promote and inhibit equity within the school district and with families in the broader community.
- Probe **the difference between multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching**; reflect on whether and how we're doing each.

ACTIONS:

PRACTICES AND ROUTINES

Educators might pursue the following objectives ...

On their own:

- Examine the impact of one's own professional **practices and routines** on student confidence and competence (in aggregate and for subgroups) and work to mediate any adverse impact.
- Build skills for productive, **difficult conversations**; communicate with truth and tact.
- Reflect on **power dynamics** and how they come into play at every level; recognize one's own power and amplify voices of those unheard.

In teams:

- Critically review the team's **curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices** to examine them for cultural bias, relevance, and rigor; revise or refresh curriculum plans and curriculum maps based on knowledge of students.
- Collaborate to recognize and attend to individual **student strengths and needs** and coordinate efforts to ensure each student receives what he or she needs.
- Engage in collaborative inquiry to investigate and **respond to patterns found in disaggregated schoolwide data**.

As a whole school:

- Collaborate to create agreements about new **schoolwide norms, communication routines, and/or events** that support relationship building (teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to parent, teacher to administrator) and shape organizational culture.
- Engage in **schoolwide learning walks** or equity assessments to monitor progress toward equity goals and assist in identification of promising next steps.
- Collaborate to prepare to use new **instructional, curricular, and/or assessment practices** that have been selected to align with the needs and values of our students.

SYSTEMS:

POLICIES AND STRUCTURES

Educators might pursue the following objectives ...

On their own:

- Examine and reflect on **impact of local policies and structures on one's own students** in order to advocate for improvements.
- Learn to call out **institutional racism** and communicate effectively with those in power (or become the one in power).
- Strengthen one's **own instructional leadership skills** to be an asset for teacher-led professional learning that advances equity.

In teams:

- Critically examine **systems for evaluating and grading student work** and their effects on student motivation and outcomes; reform policies while including student and family voices.
- Investigate the effectiveness of **school communications policies and structures**; propose improvements that meet the needs and values of families.
- Review **family engagement** data with families and establish new systems for engagement.

As a whole school:

- Analyze students' access to opportunity with regard to **scheduling, class/teacher assignment policies, and special programs**, and redesign systems to improve equity of access.
- Look at data to critically examine **student attendance, behavior, and retention policies**; create cross-stakeholder team to reform and monitor them.
- Engage in (internal or external) **equity audits** to monitor and inspire progress toward equity goals.

might share student work to support each other to bolster authentic knowledge of students as well as to norm assumptions about high expectations. Team members might also examine the dynamics of their relationships within the team as a way to push on assumptions about others.

In a schoolwide context, a faculty may invest in deepening its knowledge about concepts of culture, equity, and trust, and reflect together with honesty about how each is experienced in the community.

Actions: There are many lines of inquiry educators can pursue on their own to expand their actions. They can, for example, experiment with new classroom routines to strengthen student confidence and competence and solicit student feedback to ensure they are working. They also can hone their confidence and competence for engaging in difficult conversations with truth and tact so that they can speak up in the face of inequity.

When educators work in teams, they can engage in professional learning that retools individual and collective action. For example, they might rethink and redesign schoolwide curriculum traditions, instructional expectations, or assessment routines. They might support each other in honing practices targeted at identified achievement gaps through collaborative inquiry.

At the same time, faculty can take action in schoolwide professional learning. While the faculty might devise and institute new routines to improve how adults across a school engage with one another as well as with students, families, and partners, it might also create traditions that help them monitor and celebrate progress toward equity goals.

Systems: To focus on systems, educators can work independently to become knowledgeable about relevant policies and structures. Individuals

may, for example, study the influence of institutional racism on policies at the school or district level and propose solutions to those in power.

Team professional learning may attend to systems change by critically examining and revising schedules to give students access and supports of those best equipped to do so. Teams of educators, together with family and community members, might also research and propose more equitable grading routines, assessment systems, and student retention policies.

Similarly, at the school level, the role of transportation, student assignment, and resource allocation might become the subject of a study team and a plan of action. All of these systems changes lie beyond what a team or faculty can typically address in its regular meetings. Institutional changes such as these seem intractable, but with protected time for analysis, problem solving, and advocacy, they are possible.

By considering the three dimensions across a range of professional learning contexts, educators can be strategic as they develop their professional learning plans for equity. They can power up existing learning experiences so that equity connections are more explicit and identify what is missing or unfocused so it can be further developed.

STAYING THE COURSE

Whether attending to beliefs, actions, or systems, professional conversations that seek to advance equity can be challenging. We must have a genuine curiosity to listen, eagerness to learn, and willingness to make ourselves vulnerable when we discuss equity and dimensions of diversity such as race, class, disability, and gender.

We can create conditions for success by creating a safe space with norms that establish shared expectations, secure agreement that missteps in

understanding and experience will be taken in stride, and affirm that our shared desire to advance equity will ground our interactions in mutual respect.

Obstacles such as local politics, competing priorities or factions, wavering leadership, and leadership transitions can threaten this work. These obstacles may create bumps in the road and stymie our coordinated approach, but we must stay on the path to take action individually and as communities.

We can do so fortified with knowledge about three key dimensions — beliefs, practices, and systems — that need to change and with ideas of what professional learning might look like when designed to advance equity.

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