

Equity Leadership Dispositions

Education leaders play a crucial role in identifying and addressing inequities in schools and school systems. To do that work effectively, what do leaders need to know and be able to do? The NYC Leadership Academy developed a list of six research-based leadership dispositions we have found are crucial for leaders to build a path toward creating a school community by, with and for every student.

1

Reflect on personal assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Personal beliefs determine how an individual sees the world, other people, and oneself (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Our beliefs and unconscious biases determine our actions and practices, and these actions inform how systems develop and operate, including our current education system (Berg, 2018). For leaders to feel comfortable addressing issues of bias, inequity, and race, they first need to have a heightened understanding of their own identities, values, assumptions and biases (Brown, 2004; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). In addition to this self-exploration, leaders must cultivate and maintain a deep understanding of how privilege, power, and oppression operate, historically and currently in school and society (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Without a firm self-examination of their own identity and role in historically inequitable structures, leaders risk reproducing inequities inside and outside their schools and systems (Jones & Vagle, 2013; Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore & Hodgins, 2007; Rigby & Tredway, 2015). As leaders of diverse communities, such critical self-reflection should be an ongoing, lifelong process (Brown, 2004).

Live this disposition by

- Continuously examining and reflecting on how your role in the system might contribute to or support inequitable practices.
- Actively seeking to learn how privilege, power, and oppression operate historically and currently in education.
- Recognizing the privileges you might hold based on position, identity, or background.
- Seeking feedback and looking for low-inference evidence to help reflect on how you are leading for equity.

Questions for reflection

- How has race intersected with your leadership journey?
- What is your personal vision and belief system around race and equity?
- How have you benefited from and leveraged your education to get where you are?
- How are your experiences different from or similar to the students you serve?

2

Publicly model a personal belief system that is grounded in equity.

Those leading for equity must demonstrate that addressing racial inequity is a priority. Leaders accomplish this by consistently naming equity as a driving force behind leadership actions and decisions. By taking a strong and vocal stance, leaders communicate the value of equity across all practice and can establish a coherent and common purpose for members of the learning community (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). To help others build the skills and will to examine the impact of race and value equity as a shared goal, leaders model their own learning, self-disclosing and acknowledging personal biases and fears (Theoharris, 2010). There can be an anxiety and fear in offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant when discussing issues of race and inequality (Singleton & Hays, 2008). By modeling vulnerability and emphasizing that mistakes will be made when speaking about issues of race, leaders can help others overcome those fears and encourage them to take risks in exploring and sharing their own feelings (Sue et. al, 2009).

Live this disposition by

- Using language that promotes a belief in the ability of each student and adult to achieve, particularly those from groups that have been historically marginalized.
- Openly valuing the diversity of all members of our community.
- Clearly demonstrating that you believe in eliminating inequities and providing each student with what they need to be successful.
- Publicly discussing the work you are doing to become more aware of your own identity, privilege, and biases. Model vulnerability by acknowledging where there are gaps in your knowledge and skills related to equity.
- Encouraging risk-taking and create space for others to have open dialogue about race and address hard-to-discuss topics.

Questions for reflection

- What is your educational vision in general, and for your district or school specifically?
- Where does equity fit into that vision?
- What are your beliefs around growth mindset, and how, if at all, have you talked about mindset with your teams?

3

Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decision-making, and practice.

Racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students and families experience school differently, making it essential to examine the norms and interactions around race, ethnicity, and diversity within the school environment (Blitz, Yull, & Clauhs, 2020). Equity-centered environments are responsive to and inclusive of the cultural identities of students, staff, and the surrounding community. Leaders play an integral part in developing the school environment and in holding staff accountable to meeting the needs of diverse students and families (Cherkowski, 2010; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Leaders therefore model culturally responsive practices, including communicating high expectations for all students; designing curriculum that incorporates students' backgrounds, languages and learning styles; and working with parents and families as valued and respected partners (Klingner et al., 2005; Smith, 2005; Gerhart, Harris, & Mixon, 2011). Stronger partnerships and collaboration between schools and communities improve family engagement and increases the sense of trust between students, families, and schools (Blitz et al., 2020). It can also reduce cultural misunderstandings and further understanding of the diversity of beliefs and values in the community (Gordon & Ronder, 201; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017).

Live this disposition by

- Actively seeking and making use of diverse perspectives in decision-making.
- Considering the intended and unintended consequences of decisions on all stakeholder groups.
- In group discussions, paying close attention to which voices aren't being heard and invite them to express their perspective.
- Actively seeking to learn about the identities and communities of students in our school(s).
- When decisions are being made, pushing the decision maker to question which groups are benefitting or being left out, and why.

Questions for reflection

- What have you said and done in your career to address racial inequities?
- Are the decisions you are making as a leader reflecting the needs and priorities of students and families? If so, how? If not, how do you need to change your decision-making process to better reflect the needs of different stakeholders?

4

Purposefully build the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school.

Educational equity work cannot happen in isolation. Without a collaborative effort, staff may believe equity concerns are someone else's job and not their own (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Snyder, Trowery, & McGrath, 2019.). To ensure members of the learning community both understand and invest in addressing issues of equity and inclusion, leaders build their capacity through collaborative dialogue and professional learning (Riehl, 2000; Theoharris, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Leaders designate time and space for staff to examine their personal beliefs and collaborate to change educational practice (Smith, 2005; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Berg, 2018; Alvarez, 2019). They work with staff in a democratic manner, implementing shared decision-making structures and developing a culture of trust and respect. These leaders understand that empowering staff is a key feature of creating more socially just schools (Theoharris, 2010).

Live this disposition by

- Creating the conditions and common language for regular courageous conversations around equity
- Building others' capacity to learn and practice language and behaviors that are responsive to differences across lines of race, ethnicity, language, class, religion, ability, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity
- Providing the space, tools, and support for staff to reflect on their own personal beliefs, biases, assumptions, and behavior, especially those who have been historically minoritized
- Providing structured and consistent professional learning opportunities to develop and deepen culturally responsive teaching practice

Questions for reflection

- How have I created a coalition of leaders around me that all have the capacity to act through a lens of equity?
- Am I creating opportunities for others to lead conversations around equity and receive critical feedback from peers?

5 Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations.

If schools are to evolve, the organizational structure of schools must be transformed. To do this, leaders must review policies, practices, and structures and remove potential barriers that disadvantage students on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other characteristics (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Students that embody one or many of these characteristics have been minoritized by society and individuals telling them that they are less than and incapable of the skills and abilities of white dominant culture. Confronting these long-standing beliefs and practices requires a collaborative effort, where stakeholders engage in intentional conversations about who benefits from current policy and practice and who is being minoritized or disadvantaged (Klingner et al., 2005). Leaders can initiate the process by examining individual and system data that have been disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and other characteristics; conducting an equity audit; and engaging in a process of collaborative inquiry (Gooden & Dantly, 2012; Gooden, 2012; Larson & Barton, 2013).

Live this disposition by

- Confronting behavior that openly or covertly promotes inequity, colorblindness, and deficit-thinking.
- Regularly examining district data for signs of inequity with district leadership team.
- Purposefully building the capacity of others to examine their own assumptions, beliefs, and personal biases.
- Establishing high expectations (performance and behavioral) for adults and students in our school(s), regardless of identity or background.
- Regularly engaging in conversations with stakeholders about racial equity and access, even in the face of risk and pushback.

Questions for reflection

- How have you made equity-focused discussions and learning, particularly those associated with race, part of your staff's professional learning experiences?
- Consider a time when you identified and confronted practices or interactions that were based on race or culturally biased assumptions. How did you manage that situation? What was the outcome?

6

Create systems and structures to promote equity with a focus on minoritized populations.

Once barriers are identified, leaders must then ensure that new policies and practices are created that prioritize student need and promote equity (Bustamante et al., 2009). School systems in which all students are successful are systems that create policies based on a thorough analysis of student, teacher, and school data, changing community demographics, and available financial, material, time, and human resources (Klingner et al., 2005). Equity work is complex, requiring fundamental structural changes and coordinated efforts. Leaders must establish clarity and agreement on a shared vision and plan of action, define clearly articulated measures of success, and build a community-wide commitment to equity and access (Rimmer, 2016). Finally, leaders must ensure that this work is not seen as an add-on, but a lens through which all decisions will be made (Berg, 2018).

Live this disposition by

- Ensuring that equity is at the forefront of the district and schools' strategic vision.
- Creating processes that promote the recruitment, support, and retention of diverse staff.
- Seeking, allocating, and managing resources to directly support minoritized populations.
- Ensuring that new policies and practices (e.g., curriculum, discipline, funding) prioritize student need and promote equity for minoritized populations.
- Partnering with families, staff, and communities to ensure fair treatment and equal access to opportunities.

Questions for reflection

- What are your staff assignment policies? How are those policies, as well as your initiatives for recruiting and retaining teachers, helping your school or district better reflect the diversity of your student population?
- How do you determine the needs of different subgroups of students across your district? And then how do you decide how district resources are allocated?

To learn more about how the NYC Leadership Academy can support you in your equity-focused work, contact Phil Benowitz, Associate Vice President of Client Engagement, at pbenowitz@nycleadershipacademy.org, or at 646-981-2140.

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