Leading an Equity-Focused Response Through and Beyond COVID-19

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated many of the inequities that live in schools and school systems across the country. As school systems across the country closed, it quickly became apparent the integral role schools play, providing not only education but nutrition, wellness, safety, and access to technology and other essential services for students and their families. The transition to remote learning has made it clear that the gaps that already existed between minoritized students and their classmates will only widen as the COVID-19 crisis continues. Some students have access to online learning from home, while others do not have a computer or internet connectivity. Some students have family members at home who can provide enriching learning opportunities, while other students' families must work all day or night and are not as available to help with schoolwork. Some students are experiencing hunger and fear that their family will not be able to pay rent or electricity bills because of loss of income.

Given these growing gaps, as well as the flexibility that states and school systems have created for schools by canceling standardized exams and foregoing required grades and seat hours, there is an opportunity to reimagine what school could look, sound, and feel like when it is more equitable. This guide is meant to support principals and school system leaders in leading an equity-focused response to the ripple effect of COVID-19, to ensure they are best equipped to support their students, families, and staff through and beyond this crisis.

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).

Questions for reflection

- What are your biases about remote learning? How might these biases affect the way you lead your team in adjusting to online learning? How might your biases affect the way your team approaches online learning?
- How are you feeling about social distancing? What's your response to the increased need for this?
- Even in this time when we are all experiencing trauma, some of us are more privileged than others. What are your privileges in this current situation?
- How are you using your privilege to support students and families?
- How are you currently upholding the characteristics of <u>white supremacy culture</u> as we move through the pandemic?

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).

Questions for reflection

- In what ways are inequities appearing in surprising or unexpected ways because of the current situation? How are these surprising inequities making you see your school or system in a new way?
- Have there been incidents of discrimination against people who identify as Asian in your school community? How are you responding or talking about those incidents with your team and your community?
- Now that you're not in the building seeing staff and students every day, what have you done to try to keep your energy and motivation at the level it needs to be? What are you doing, or will you do, to continue to build culture and relationships with staff and students?

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).

Questions for reflection

- What data / evidence are you collecting now to inform planning for next year?
- How are you moving students that were already behind forward to where they need to be? How are you planning to address the needs of students who might fall further behind during remote schooling?
- How are you addressing student access to curriculum if they don't have access to computers, internet, tech support?
- What does support look like for students who have IEPs, exceptional needs, or who live in an unsafe environment?
- Are school work and materials being appropriately translated so that non-English speaking parents can help their children with their school work? Are translators accessible to families that have questions and need additional assistance?
- How are you ensuring the decisions you are making are not perpetuating characteristics of <u>white supremacy culture</u>?

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).

Questions for reflection

- How do you help teacher teams and school leadership teams connect and support each other in this time of uncertainty and grief?
- How are you building the capacity of teachers and coaches to choose instructional curricula and high-quality instructional materials that is appropriate for the remote learning environment?
- How are you supporting teachers to engage and continue to build relationships with kids in new, innovative ways?

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).

Questions for reflection

- How are you eliminating any attendance, grading and other accountability structures for student learning that are not conducive to the current situation?
- How are you being an ally and co-conspirator to your Asian students and families experiencing racism?
- How are you providing students and families access to mental and emotional support such as online therapy, meditation, relaxation, arts, and recreation?
- How are you connecting your families to crisis supports such as food pantries, rent/mortgage/utility assistance, unemployment benefits, etc.?
- How are you eliminating institutional processes that are perpetuating characteristics of <u>white supremacy culture</u>?

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).

Questions for reflection

- How are you connecting with families to support them in supporting their children in remote learning? How are they experiencing those connections—where do they feel they are able to stay connected and what seems to be missing for them/their staff? For whom are the connections working/not working? What needs do they have?
- What are your plans for creating a healing environment in your school or system when school eventually returns to school buildings? For interactions among students and from the experience of the pandemic? What does that look like?
- How are you using this experience to create a more equitable school experience for students and families once they return to campus?
- How are you using this experience to eliminate or reduce the characteristics of <u>white supremacy culture</u> that exist(ed) for students and families once they return to campus?

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

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