

# Head & Heart: An expanded approach to meeting students' needs as schools reopen

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Today we find ourselves at a unique moment in time. We are living through unprecedented, nationwide school closures and economic uncertainty from COVID-19. The recent killings of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black people have thrown systemic racism and police brutality into sharp relief. Against the backdrop of these “twin pandemics”—racism and COVID-19—school and system leaders across the country are asking, “How do we reopen schools and re-engage students, their families, and the community?”

The work ahead requires a fully integrated approach to academic and social-emotional development. And in order to meet our vision for educational equity, we must directly acknowledge and address issues of racial equity.

There is a palpable urgency to serve students well as districts develop operations plans to ensure student health and safety for the 2020-2021 school year. In addition to addressing learning loss due to school closures and recognizing potential trauma resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, educators must take action against the deep-rooted racial injustices people of color have experienced for generations. This includes accepting responsibility for the ways in which schools and school systems have perpetrated harm against students, their families, and the community. We **all** share a collective opportunity to create systems that respond to the underlying issues of racism that have led to consequences such as the weaponization of ICE officers against Latinx families and the humiliation, criminalization, physical harm, and higher suspension rates inflicted against Black children and other children of color.<sup>1</sup> To provide more equitable experiences for all young people, we must support students' academic and social-emotional development in ways that are responsive to this current context.

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“We’re not only at a COVID-19 moment. We’re at a post-George Floyd moment. These twin pandemics we’re experiencing are unique moments, and I’m not sure we’ve ever seen any moment like this in human history.”

**Dr. Muhammad Khalifa**

Robert H. Beck Chair of Ideas in Education  
Professor, Organizational Leadership, Policy and  
Development, University of Minnesota,

*inspired from a conversation with*

**Dr. Megan Bang**

Professor of Learning Sciences, Northwestern U. and  
Senior Vice President at the Spencer Foundation

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To be clear, this will require deep and adaptive work. There are no quick fixes or checklists that will lead to immediate solutions. At the same time, working for educational equity requires three processes that are sequential as well as iterative: *learn*, *unlearn*, and *advocate*. These processes should occur across stakeholders, from students, to teachers, to school and system leaders, to families and community members.



**Learning** involves listening, observation, immersion, reflection, and data analysis. Understanding and triangulating data from these key activities will help leaders overcome the dominance of a single narrative and the entrenched biases that have hindered many well-meaning reforms. Leadership researchers have documented the pressure to solve problems quickly and move to action. People tend to deprioritize diagnosis, collecting data, exploring multiple possible interpretations of the situation, and alternative potential interventions in order to settle on a solution.<sup>2</sup> However, inattention to and ignorance of historical and systemic context will position leaders to retrofit reforms on inequitable practices. Additionally, leaders will be positioned for transactional and inauthentic relationships void of the depth that comes from self-reflection and an appreciation of the beauty and struggles of the people we serve.<sup>3</sup>

**Unlearning** involves dismantling old practices and beliefs. It is a process of being influenced by new understandings. On the topic of unlearning, Mark Bonchek writes, “Unlearning is not about forgetting. It’s about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. When we learn, we add new skills or knowledge to what we already know. When we unlearn, we step outside the mental model in order to choose a different one.”<sup>4</sup>

**Advocating** involves acting on the developing consciousness of the stories, identities, strengths, and needs of the students and families we serve. Leaders will create space for students, teachers, and families to reflect a culture of learning while recognizing and responding to bias.

**Fostering student academic and social-emotional development through a racial equity lens has always been what’s right for children, but recently this conversation has leapt to the forefront.** In polling data from April 2020, nearly 9 in 10 parents were worried about their children falling behind academically due to coronavirus-related school closures, and 8 in 10 parents said their children were experiencing heightened stress levels.<sup>5</sup> In May, the killing of George Floyd renewed and heightened conversations about police violence and systemic racism nationwide and within the education community—from school and system leaders, to education organizations, to teachers, students, and parents. In our conversations with parents and educators, we hear adults who are anxious about students falling behind, are overwhelmed by how best to support them, and are angry and heartbroken by the immense systemic barriers in our educational system.

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“It will be important to take stock of the experiences our students have gone through during this unprecedented time. Now more than ever, **social and emotional learning must be woven into the structure of our student experiences** whether they occur in-person or remote.”

Jessica Skwir  
 Director of School Leadership  
 AUSL (Academy of Urban School Leadership)

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**We must resist thinking in siloed terms when it comes to social-emotional learning (SEL), academics, and equity.** Rather, these elements of our work as educators and partners go hand in hand.

SEL and academic development are inextricably linked.<sup>6</sup> Academic instruction has social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, and we know from research that SEL practices are best suited when integrated into the academic experience.<sup>7</sup> A solid body of scientific evidence confirms that SEL is important for a host of academic outcomes, as students require a set of skills and mindsets in order to engage rigorously in academic content.<sup>8</sup> SEL is also important in its own right: to foster students’ development as whole and healthy human beings. Taken together, this research demonstrates that success in life requires both academic and social-emotional skills.<sup>9</sup> When students develop these interconnected sets of competencies, skills, and mindsets, and the adults that work with them cultivate and practice social

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“Rather than being pursued as two separate bodies of work, the field needs to identify ways in which equity and social, emotional, and academic development can be mutually reinforcing. **To accomplish this requires examining issues of race directly;** this can be difficult and uncomfortable, but we cannot avoid race and let the challenges go unacknowledged and, therefore, inadequately addressed.”

The Aspen Institute  
 Pursuing Social and Emotional Development  
 Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action

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and emotional skills, entire school communities are more able to thrive.

**We must recognize that we cannot do this work outside of sociopolitical and racial context.** Our educational system is the product of a complex and interconnected history of racism and bias. Instruction and learning—both social-emotional and academic—requires us to acknowledge and address institutional racism.<sup>10</sup> Avoiding or improperly contextualizing issues students face undermines the purpose of an integrated approach to SEL and academics, and it may perpetuate a “failure narrative” that assumes, for instance, that students of color need SEL more than others.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Cierra Kaler-Jones, “we are not fulfilling the true promise of SEL if we continue to use it as another form of policing under the empty promises of words that feel and sound good.”<sup>12</sup> To do this work, we must directly examine issues of race. An instructional approach not grounded in [racial equity](#) will only perpetuate injustice and inequity.<sup>13</sup>

**Integrally tied to this work, and crucial as students begin to return to school, is the adoption of trauma-informed practices** that respond to the needs of students and families who have experienced unprecedented uncertainty, stress, and trauma. This is particularly true for Asian and Asian-American students who have disproportionately experienced targeted racism as a result of COVID-19 and for Black and African-American students who are experiencing higher death rates caused by the racial disparities in our society or trauma as a result of systemic racism and racialized violence.

A trauma-informed approach supports all students—those who have been identified as experiencing trauma and those who have not—by fostering a learning environment that supports wellness and is sensitive to the impact of trauma. Specifically, using trauma-informed practices in the classroom ensures that all students feel supported and connected; are comfortable exploring their strengths and identities; can exercise their agency; can develop meaningful, positive relationships with adults and peers; and have access to mental health support.

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**Trauma:** An experience of an actual, perceived, or threatened negative event, or series of events, that causes emotional pain and a sense of feeling overwhelmed.

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**Trauma-informed approach:** A program, organization, or system that realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.

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*Substance Abuse  
and Mental Health Services  
Administration (SAMHSA)*

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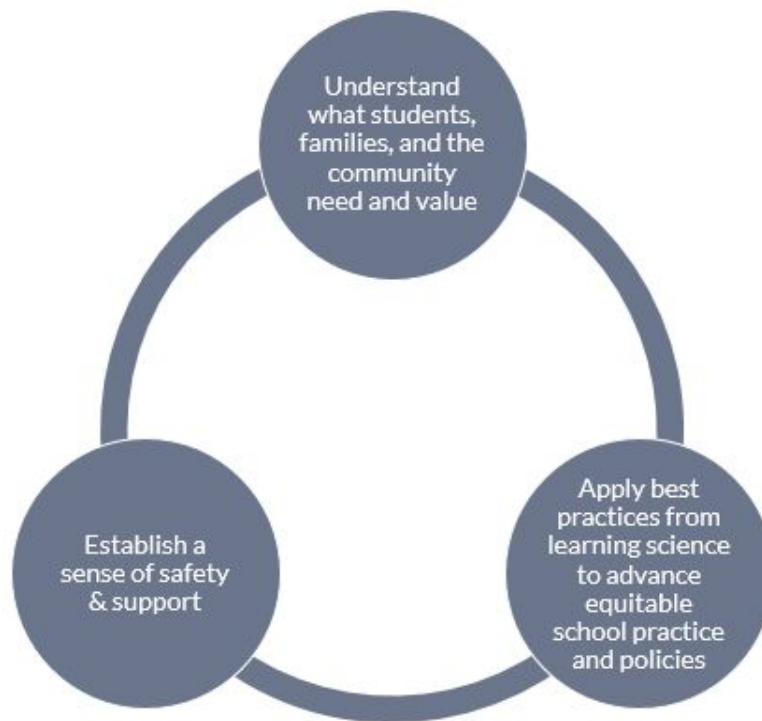
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**Racialized trauma:** The cumulative effects of racism on one’s mental health and the disproportionate impact of trauma on a racial group.

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Championing equity and pursuing justice for students, specifically students who have been traditionally underserved by our education system, will require an adaptive approach. There is no cookie-cutter solution that will apply to all school contexts. As a starting point, however, to support leaders in adopting an integrated and equity-informed approach to social-emotional learning and academic instruction, we provide three foundational principles below. For each, consider the questions or information you need in order to *learn*, *unlearn*, and *advocate* within your school or system and broader community.

## Principles for a comprehensive approach to social, emotional, and academic development



### **Principle 1: Understand what students, families, and the community need and value**

When schools reopen, it will be critical to collect, analyze, and act on a variety of information while supporting students and staff engaged in meeting students’ needs. As outlined in the recent [guidance](#) for assessing students, now is the time to reconsider the purpose of assessments and how they may have been used in the past. This requires thinking beyond traditional assessments and planning for the qualitative and quantitative data needed to guide decisions. Student, family, and community voice is particularly important to ensure students are heard and their perceptions are incorporated into decision-making. Furthermore, it is crucial that data are equitably collected, analyzed, and reported,

with an explicit focus on examining the results for students who are most marginalized, have experienced trauma and/or racialized trauma, and have diverse learning and language needs.

*Engage further:* As you seek to *learn, unlearn, and advocate* in response to principle 1, consider the following questions:

- Whose voices or interests have been most (and least) represented when learning about the needs and values of our community?
- What are the most pressing student needs I observed (and that students, families, and caregivers confirmed)? How might I address those needs, in a way that shares power and decision making?
- In what ways are our current assessments only capturing strengths of a white, middle-class culture?
- In what ways does our reporting system or our data interpretation perpetuate inequities in student achievement and development?



## Principle 2: Establish a sense of safety and support

Students in a school community need to feel physically, socially, emotionally, and academically safe and supported in order to fully engage, take risks, learn, and grow. Educators must examine whether all students experience safety and support or whether students of certain racial/ethnic and gender groups are more likely to do so. Additionally, leaders should prioritize support and resources for students who have experienced and continue to experience trauma and racialized trauma.

*Engage further:* As you seek to *learn, unlearn, and advocate* in response to principle 2, consider the following questions:

- Does every student in our school have a strong relationship with at least one adult?
- Are there differences in students’ perceptions of safety, fairness, and expectations by race/ethnicity, poverty-level, ELL status or disability status?
- Does our school have a management system based on prevention and changing behaviors, rather than reaction and punishment?



### Principle 3: Apply best practices from learning science to advance equitable school practice and policies

We know from the science of learning and development that all individuals learn best from actively participating in experiences they can reflect on and make meaning from while in a safe, nurturing environment.<sup>14</sup> Active engagement and reflection should be rooted in developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and student-centered best practices. An asset-based lens that intentionally addresses equity and inclusivity must be at the foundation of student learning.

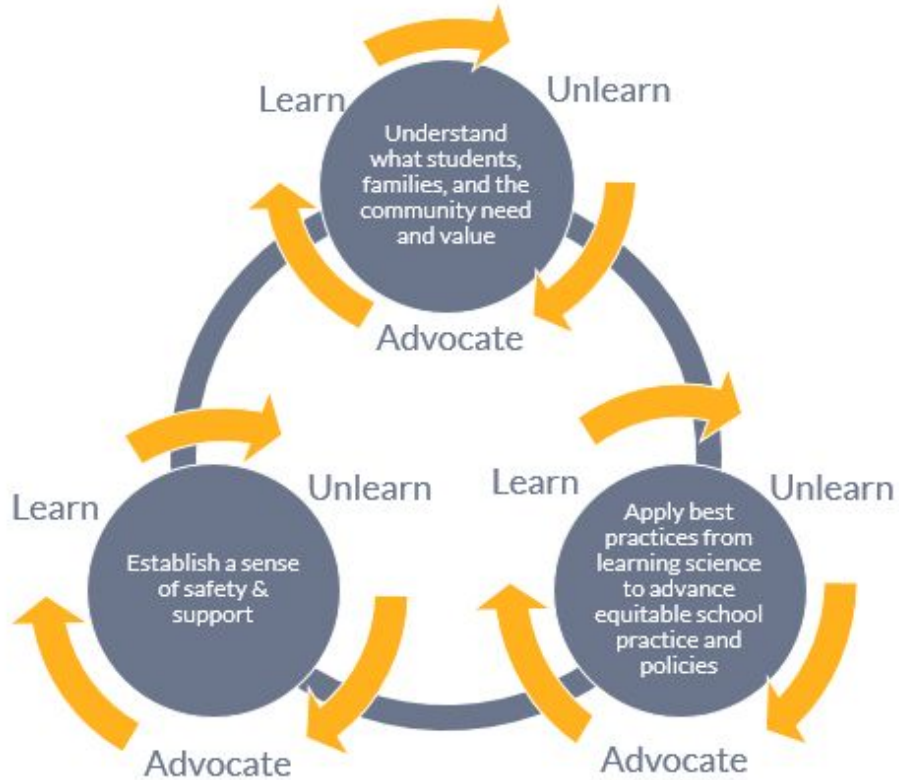
*Engage further:* As you seek to *learn*, *unlearn*, and *advocate* in response to principle 3, consider the following questions:

- Do our resources and curriculum employ culturally responsive practices to ensure all students can access the content and see its relevance?
- Do educators leverage a variety of learning strategies from cognitive research to maximize all students' learning?
- In what ways do implicit and explicit bias show up in our teaching and leading, and how can we eradicate those biases?
- Do our academic systems and policies limit opportunities for students in poverty and students of color to access courses with greater academic rigor? How might we prioritize equity-centered practices and policies?



By engaging in a process to learn, unlearn, and advocate with these principles, schools and systems can focus on establishing an environment—in-person or virtual—in which they authentically integrate equity-informed social-emotional learning with academic instruction. While context and needed outcomes will be as varied as districts themselves, below are a few examples of shifts that could illustrate an equity-informed approach to this work:

- A new assessment system that recognizes the strengths of all students, incorporating student and family voice, with results oriented toward system-level (rather than student-level) change.
- An environment in which all students and staff feel valued and respected, and have a sense of belonging that allows them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.
- A school in which all students are held to high expectations; can access the content, coursework, and strategies to optimize their learning; and see relevance in their coursework.



We can no longer be satisfied with tinkering around the edges of educational justice for children and making incremental changes against the status quo. We must reexamine our work and recognize that what we’ve done up until now isn’t yet sufficient. We can do better, we can be braver, and we must take a stronger stance in supporting school and system leaders to create more humanizing environments for children.



## Endnotes

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