



Partnership for Public Education

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
INITIATIVE

# FOSTERING EQUITY LITERACY WITH IN-SERVICE TEACHERS



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A commitment to equity in our schools ensures that every student has the access and opportunity necessary to thrive in school, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on. Creating and sustaining equitable spaces requires examination of the discriminatory policies and practices that perpetuate inequitable access to learning opportunities. The most common question we receive from school leaders: *how do we begin this work?* The following points of consideration and resources – based on research-based best practices and experiential knowledge gained from engaging in equity-learning with in-service teachers – are intended to serve as a guide for district and school leaders looking to begin or further equity-oriented professional learning in their spaces.

## Introduction:

Schools across the country are recognizing the need to address inequities in schooling policies and practices that sustain and further exacerbate opportunity gaps, preventing students' full and equitable access to high quality curriculum, teachers, and opportunities for academic success. There is no shortage of news coverage of the egregious acts of racism, homophobia, trans-aggressions, and bigotry in schools, but equally alarming, albeit less overt, are the discriminatory policies and practices which perpetuate inequitable access to learning opportunities. These inequitable policies and practices disproportionately affect historically marginalized populations and perpetuate generally low expectations and deficit-orientations toward minoritized populations. Additionally, traditional Euro-centric school curricula do not reflect diverse histories and populations and whitewash the realities of social injustice.

Consistent with national trends, Delaware's Department of Education, state legislature, and community stakeholders have recently undertaken a series of statewide efforts which center educational equity. Delaware is one of nine states participating in the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) "Diverse and Learner Ready Teacher Initiative" – striving to ensure all educators are "culturally responsive in practice by 2020," as well as working to diversify the educator workforce.<sup>1</sup> In June 2018, the Delaware State General Assembly passed Senate Bill 85, recognizing the disproportionality of out-of-school suspensions among Black and disabled students and advocating the adoption of restorative practices.<sup>2</sup> Also in 2018, The TeachDE Initiative – a coalition of teachers, local education agency leaders, representatives from institutions of higher education teacher preparation programs, and other community stakeholders – released a series of

# Fostering Equity Literacy in our Schools

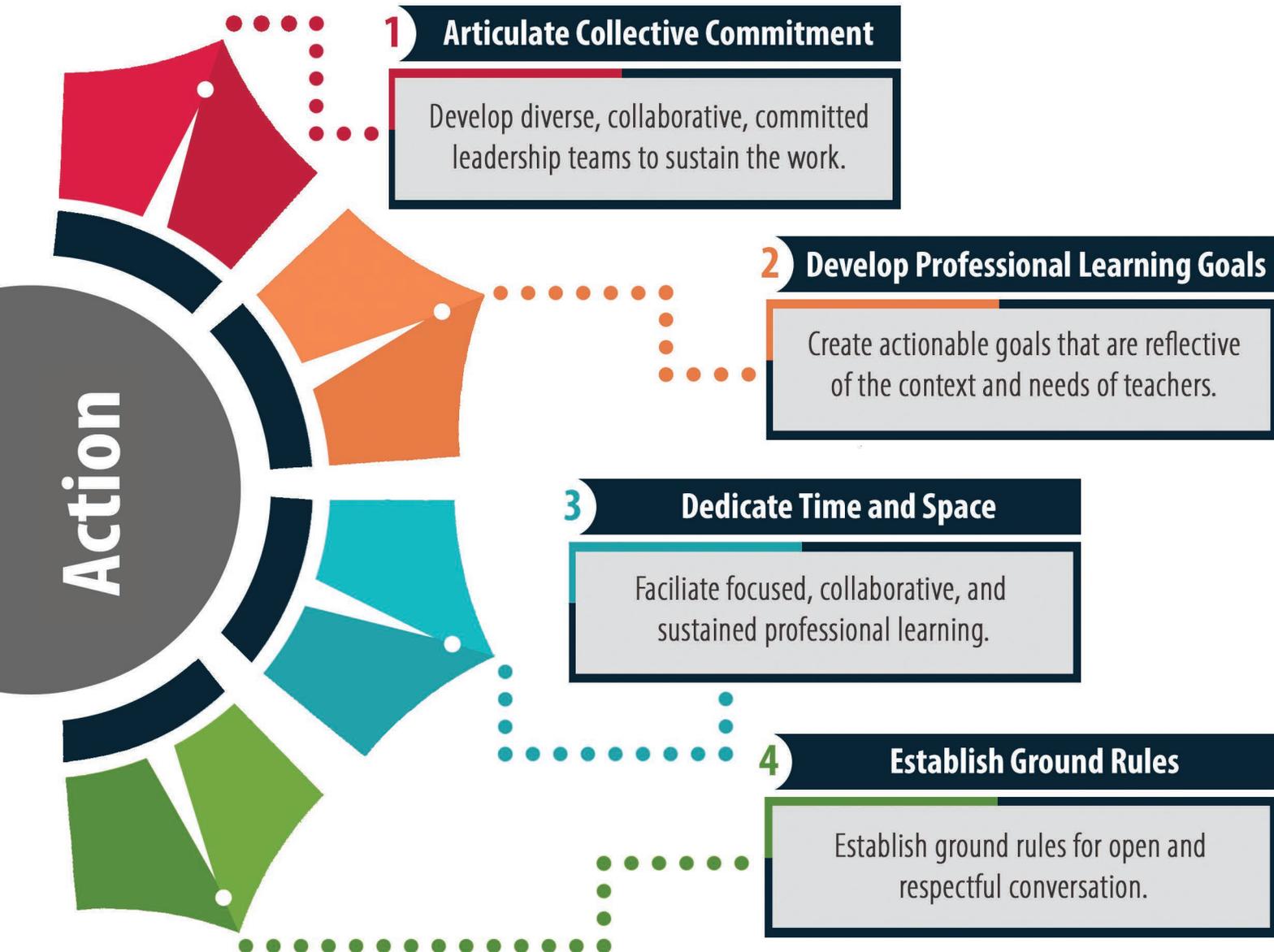


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recommendations intended to address many of the same concerns of ethnoracial teacher diversity and equity-literacy among pre- and in-service teachers in Delaware. Among the recommendations, the TeachDE advisory council recommended “establish[ing] equity-literacy as a cross-cutting theme of education preparatory programs and professional learning.”<sup>3</sup>

A commitment to equity in our schools ensures that every student has the access and opportunity necessary to thrive in school, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on. This requires that administrators, teachers, and staff engage in a rigorous examination of polices, practices, and attitudes that create

and sustain inequitable school conditions and pernicious opportunity gaps. The process requires introspection, openness to change, and overcoming deficit-orientations often perpetuated in the name of diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup>

For many school leaders, the question remains: *how do we begin this work?* The following points of consideration – based on best practices in the research and our own experiences engaging in equity-learning with in-service teachers and administrators – are intended to serve as a guide for district and school leaders looking to begin or further equity-oriented professional learning in their spaces.

## Points for Consideration:

### 1. Developing Collective Commitment and Fostering Leadership

A logical instinct in beginning equity-oriented professional learning is often to outsource these efforts to an expert facilitator able to provide training. However, this approach presents two challenges: first, conversations around equity received from an outsider – a person not familiar with your unique context – may be perceived as judging your school and staff; second, conversations may not be sustained after the trainers have left. Expert facilitators and trainers can provide professional development but should be utilized in conjunction with the development of an internal leadership team. Facilitators should support school leaders in continuing conversations and developing additional professional learning opportunities. The use of collaborative and diverse internal leadership teams can foster the sense of personal connectedness – *connection before content* – that enables the challenging conversations around issues of equity and personal beliefs, biases, and practices. Furthermore, developing internal leadership teams institutionalizes the commitment to equity and ensures conversations are sustained.

**The use of collaborative and diverse internal leadership teams fosters personal connectedness, institutionalizes collective commitment, and sustains conversations.**

Voluntary book studies and reading groups can be utilized to develop a knowledgeable and committed leadership team.<sup>5</sup> Book studies can provide a requisite knowledge around issues of equity and establish a model for collaboratively codesigning equity professional learning. Leadership teams should dedicate regular time to meeting, discussing, reflecting, planning, and debriefing throughout the development and journey of equity professional learning.

### 2. Establishing Goals for Professional Learning

The development of equity literacy should be understood like any other form of professional learning; unlike a training on diversity, inclusion, or multiculturalism,

fostering equity literacy requires a sustained approach to knowledge, belief, and skill development.<sup>6</sup> Equity literacy is, in fact, developing a literateness that enables one to recognize, respond, redress, and create equitable educational spaces.<sup>7</sup> As such, equity professional learning, should utilize best practices around professional learning.

**The purpose and goals of the professional learning should be reflective of the context and determined by the needs of the staff and school.**

Best practices in professional learning reiterate the importance of clear, concise, and focused aims.<sup>8</sup> As a first step, organizers need to consider the explicit goals of the undertaking. The purpose may be to *create equitable spaces for student learning, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on* but leaders should also consider actionable goals to achieve that purpose. For example: *being able to engage in open and meaningful conversations about social identity among staff and students; recognizing inequities in our schools including policies, practices, and individual beliefs; or learning and integrating culturally-responsive pedagogical practices*. The purpose and goals of the professional learning should be reflective of the context and determined by the needs of the staff and school.

Leaders should be mindful to effectively communicate the intention of the work and not over-rely on the data. Data is useful for providing context and examining outcomes – the disproportionality of discipline, achievement gaps, tracking, graduation rates, college attainment – but is often met with denial of accuracy or currency.<sup>9</sup> For educators already inundated with data, the instinct can be to dismiss the use of quantitative measures that do not engage their specific context nor reflect their intentions. Furthermore, the use of quantitative measures and data points can be received as placing an onus of personal responsibility for systemic inequities. Goals and objectives should be crafted without singular specificity to any one data point, such as a reduction in achievement gap. The use of data can be helpful in providing an overall context but should not inherently establish the goals of the work; the data may inform the purpose but should not alone constitute the goals for professional learning.



**“WE NEED TO CONTINUE TO PUSH THE CONVERSATION SO EQUITY BECOMES SOMETHING WE DO THINK ABOUT EVERYDAY.”** - Educator Reflection

### 3. Dedicating Time and Space for Sustained Conversations

Developing diverse leadership – across units, grade levels, and subject areas – ensures equity conversations transcend a singular staff meeting or professional development training. Equity ought to be central to *all* conversations in your school – including staff meetings, professional development, professional learning communities, curriculum planning meetings, and collegial conversations.

**Equity ought to be central to *all* conversations in your school**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) can serve as conducive spaces to begin and sustain equity conversations. PLCs afford the sustained, focused, and collaborative processes conducive to effective professional learning. By design, PLCs facilitate sustained, small-group conversations and facilitate the furtherance of relationships useful to engage in challenging conversations around social identity and inequity.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the shared directorship of PLCs allows staff the opportunity to direct their learning and conversations in ways that can be most beneficial to the group.

### 4. Establishing Ground Rules for Conversation

Establishing ground rules for open and respectful conversation is key to engaging in equity professional learning. Creating and committing to ground rules recognizes that conversations about inequity and identity – race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on – can be difficult. Recognizing

that these conversations can be challenging not only sets the stage for conversations to occur, it legitimates the discomfort and apprehension that many may feel. Conversations about social identity require overcoming one’s own racial illiteracy, fragility, and defensive reactions.<sup>11</sup> Establishing ground rules not only recognizes this difficulty but signals an attempt to mitigate potential harm.

Creating ground rules for conversations can serve as a useful collaborative exercise for participants.<sup>12</sup> Teachers’ expertise in establishing healthy spaces for open communication in their classrooms can be utilized in developing ground rules for equity conversations. Examples of frequently used ground rules include: use “I” statements; avoid generalizations; listen to understand, not to respond; call others in rather than out; ask to understand.

### Conclusion:

Committing to educational equity – assuring that every student has the access and opportunity necessary to thrive in school, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and so on – is not extraneous work; rather it is *the work* for educators. Given our chosen profession, creating and sustaining equitable spaces for learning to occur must be our priority. In order to ensure the work of fostering equity literacy is thoughtful, productive, responsive, and sustained, we recommend the development of diverse, collaborative, and committed leadership teams; the creation of actionable professional learning goals that are reflective of the context and needs of teachers; the facilitation of focused, collaborative, and sustained professional learning opportunities; and co-creation of ground rules to guide open and healthy conversations around the challenging topics of inequity and identity.



**“ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION  
ALLOWED CONVERSATION TO BECOME EASIER.”** - Educator Reflection

## Resources:

Gorski, Paul and Katy Swalwell. 2015. “Equity Literacy for All.” *Educational Leadership*, March 2015: 34-40.  
<http://www.edchange.org/publications/Equity-Literacy-for-All.pdf>

Teaching Tolerance  
<https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development>

The Critical Multicultural Education Pavilion  
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/index.html>

## Further Reading:

Bieler, Deborah. 2018. *The Power of Teacher Talk: Promoting Equity and Retention Through Student Interactions*.

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Singleton, Glenn E. 2015. *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> CCSSO. 2018. "CCSSO Launches Effort to Foster a Diverse and Culturally Responsive Teaching Workforce." <https://ccsso.org/blog/ccsso-launches-effort-foster-diverse-and-culturally-responsive-teaching-workforce>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://legis.delaware.gov/BillDetail/25808>

<sup>3</sup> TeachDE Advisory Council. 2018. "Recommendations to Strengthen the Teacher Pipeline in Delaware." *Partnership for Public Education*, August 2018. <https://sites.udel.edu/ppe/files/2017/03/TeachDE-Recommendations-August-2018-2e0rms8.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2008. "It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 37(2): 104-109.

<sup>5</sup> See "Further Reading" for suggested books.

<sup>6</sup> Aguilar, Elena. 2016. "Developing Resilient, Equity-Conscious Teachers." *EdWeek*, October 5. <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2016/10/05/developing-resilient-equity-conscious-teachers.html?r=1125012433&mkey=24E54BD0-4400-11E9-8A17-86BDC819EBCD>

<sup>7</sup> Gorski, Paul C. and Katy Swalwell. 2015. "Equity Literacy for All." *Educational Leadership*, 72(6): 34-40.

<sup>8</sup> Darling-Hammond, Linda, Maria E. Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner. 2017. "Effective Teacher Professional Development." *Learning Policy Institute*, June 5. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/effective-teacher-professional-development-report>.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Tatum, Beverly. 1992. "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1):1-26.

<sup>10</sup> Hord, Shirley. 2015. "How Professional Learning Communities Benefit Students and Teachers." *EdWeek*, August 27. [https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning\\_forwards\\_pd\\_watch/2015/08/how\\_professional\\_learning\\_communities\\_benefit\\_students\\_and\\_teachers.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_forwards_pd_watch/2015/08/how_professional_learning_communities_benefit_students_and_teachers.html)

<sup>11</sup> Stevenson, Howard. 2014. *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences That Make a Difference*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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Muhammad, Malik. 2019. "Shame as a Challenge to Racial Equity in Schools." *Akobon*, March 19. <https://akobenllc.org/shame-as-a-challenge-to-racial-equity-in-schools/>.

<sup>12</sup> For additional examples of ground-rules:

Singleton, Glenn E. 2015. *Courageous Conversations about Race: a Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

EdChange. "Guide for Setting Ground Rules." <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html>.

Teaching Tolerance. "Let's Talk." <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>.



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The Partnership for Public Education (PPE) is inspired by a vision of excellence and equity in public education for Delaware's children and families. Our work is grounded in the belief that research, practice, family, and community are all needed in the systematic improvement of educational opportunities. This goal is most effectively achieved through collaboration and cooperation.

The *mission* of PPE is to bring-together members of the University of Delaware and the broader Delaware educational community—including educators, families, and community leaders—to *identify* shared needs and opportunities and to *facilitate* the exchange of knowledge.

**Together, we can strengthen public education through collaboration and partnership.**