

Equity-Focused Leadership

How School Leaders Can Accelerate
Student Learning (and Keep Great Teachers)



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“ The work we have to do with ourselves is ongoing. How we show up as leaders is deeply rooted in our personal experiences. ”

—Dr. Ventura Rodriguez,
Nonprofit Leader, Massachusetts

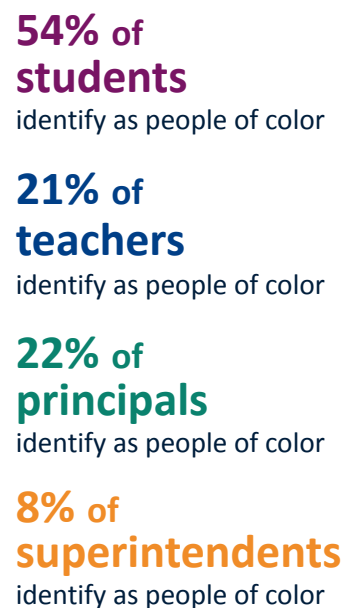
The Time for Equity is Now

A quality K-12 education can, and should, be accessible to all children in the US. The effects of COVID-19 and the opportunity gaps it magnified, in addition to the longstanding second pandemic of racial injustice, have shone a light on inequities that have always existed, especially in our K-12 education system.

Studies¹ show that students of color, who historically have been the most impacted by these ongoing inequities, benefit when they are led by educators who look like them. Yet, the diversity among our nation’s teachers², principals³, and superintendents⁴ in the past decades has not kept pace with the diversity among our nation’s public school students.⁵ This is known as a representation gap.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that education leaders continue to lead equity-focused work in schools, even though it can be challenging, risky, or uncomfortable at times. Research⁶ confirms that all students, including students of color and their white peers, benefit from seeing diverse teachers and school leaders working together to replace inequitable practices with school cultures anchored in respect, high expectations, and meaningful relationships. This kind of leadership also creates the kind of conditions in which high-quality teachers want to stay.

School leaders who lead for equity are continuously learning and pushing themselves to grow into more effective change agents. But what does equity-driven leadership look, feel, and sound like? Here are five proven equity-focused leadership actions that you can start implementing in your school today.



1. Miller, C. (2018, April). Does Teacher Diversity Matter in Student Learning? New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/upshot/teacher-diversity-effect-students-learning.html>
2. Pew Research Center. (2021, December). America's public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/10/>
3. National Center for Education Statistics. (2019, August). National Teacher and Principal Survey, US Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/summary/2019141.asp>
4. American Association of School Administrators. (2021, April). American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Survey Now Available. <https://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=45539>
5. National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, May). Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge>
6. Albert Shanker Institute. (2015). The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/state-teacher-diversity-executive-summary>

Ways to Start Leading for Equity

Establish a definition and shared language

If you were to ask your team or your staff what equity looks like in your school right now, would you get a variety of responses? If the answer is yes, you need to retool your vision. Using a research-based definition is a good starting point. The Center for Public Education⁷ and The Glossary of Education Reform⁸ offer their own definitions of equity. These can be enhanced and infused with the lived experiences of your greater community to create a vision that's unique to your school.

Strong equity-focused leaders create a common vocabulary so staff, students, and families use language that is intentional and shared. Think about the words your school community might use to describe your school's equity work. What words work, and which ones are better avoided? A shared vision and language supports leaders in facilitating open conversations, inviting different perspectives, and helping to end the silence that often surrounds and perpetuates opportunity gaps. Moving toward a unified definition of equity propels the work forward—and keeps it focused.



Everybody wants to do something. We need to look at systems and structures in order for the narrative to be changed in our own school.



—Dallas Lee, School Leader, Prince George's County, Maryland

Build a foundation of trust and shared responsibility

Creating inclusive environments that allow all students, staff, and parents to feel safe, valued, cared for, and seen is another hallmark of equity-focused leadership. This kind of school culture is built on trust. Relational trust in schools⁹ takes time to develop, but when trust is present in a school building, it has an energizing effect and creates a sense of safety for trying new things. You can foster trust in several ways: listening intently, holding yourself and others accountable, having an acute understanding of how all of the roles within your school work together to achieve the desired outcome.

In fact, the responsibility for equity work is strengthened when it is shared. Some school leaders create an equity leadership team; others embed equity work in their instructional leadership teams (ILTs). ILTs are a vehicle for distributed leadership, a shared approach to leadership where decision-making is spread from the principal to a collective team, usually including assistant principals, social workers, grade-level leaders, and department heads. Having a team like this, with the myriad of perspectives it brings, builds capacity throughout your school and creates more champions for equity. Research shows that teachers in schools that engage in distributed leadership report higher levels of job satisfaction.¹⁰ When staff is engaged and trusted to make decisions that can create impactful changes for students, teachers are more likely to stay.

7. National School Boards Association. (n.d.) <https://www.nsba.org/Services/Center-for-Public-Education/equity>

8. The Glossary of Education Reform. (2016, April). <https://www.edglossary.org/equity>

9. EL Education. (2022.) <https://eleducation.org/resources/relational-trust-in-schools>

10. Torres, D. (2019, March). Distributed leadership, professional collaboration, and teachers' job satisfaction in U.S. schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0742051X171314932>

Provide all students access to effective, high-quality curricula

Equity-driven leaders are instructional leaders by necessity. They not only promote a mindset that all children can learn at exceedingly high levels, they make sure all students have access to academically rigorous and culturally relevant learning opportunities. For example, the most effective school leaders collect and review lesson plans with an eye toward ensuring they are equitably serving historically underserved student populations, including English language learners or students with learning disabilities. Instead of merely aiming for lesson plans to be based on core content standards and reflect the intellectual depth students deserve, an equity-focused leader takes the next step by prioritizing how to provide specialized instruction to underrepresented students that addresses their unique needs and provides daily access to grade-level work that is engaging and meaningful.

In addition, to promote cultural responsiveness and relevance in the classroom, school leaders must deeply understand their local school community and model how to effectively address the issues and events that are affecting students. This might include hosting “day-after” conversations to process national news events in real-time or preparing opening remarks for a staff meeting that connect a community strength to the agenda for that day.

Develop systems to equitably distribute resources

Using data to inform resource distribution is one way to ensure more equitable outcomes. For example, what do you do when a small group of parents show up to demand separate gifted and talented classes for a select group of students? Effective school leaders use student data as a launching point, engaging in dialogue that takes a critical look at the resources available, students being served, and how to ensure that whatever outcome is decided upon matches the school-wide vision, values, and student need. In this way, the group with the loudest voices and the most cultural capital doesn’t necessarily end up with the extra resources. Instead, they participate in open community meetings with other stakeholder groups. And the school leader grounds the decisions to be made in data, putting the needs of all students at the center of discussion.

How One School Leader Is Keeping Her Teachers



*Reflections from
New Leaders alum and
Head of School, Daniela Anello*

At DC Bilingual Public Charter School, an overwhelming number of teachers are staying. In fact, the school has almost 100% teacher retention. How?

“We’re all experiencing hardship and trauma right now,” explains Daniela Anello, Head of School and New Leaders alum. “My job is to notice, to listen, to understand, to provide space for processing. And then to do everything in my power to help bring people together so we have a community that feels united, connected, supported, and focused on the good ahead.”

Anello prioritizes transparency and communication. DC Bilingual has a number of committees that share in decision-making and equity-focused work. During staff meetings, staff have opportunities to process and ask questions. Community members have avenues to offer feedback. “We work really hard to be transparent and to put into practice the things we say we care about. Having transparency with all our stakeholder groups sends a good message to everyone about our priorities.”

Anello credits her school community with the growth and continued success of the school. “We’re trying to come together, to create a situation in which we unify, rather than isolate.” With close to 100 percent teacher retention, her leadership shines a light on what is possible.

Using Self-Reflection to Fuel Equity-Focused Leadership

Every school leader needs space for self-reflection. When done regularly, self-reflection becomes a highly effective leadership tool. It helps school leaders to grow in self-awareness and build integrity and trust within the communities they serve.

Self-reflection is also the fuel for equity-focused leadership. Ongoing inquiry of your own perceptions and understandings can be valuable tools to call out and act on the inequities you see within your school. These five questions are a great place to begin—and to revisit throughout the school year.

1. *How do my personal experiences shape how I approach equity in my school or school district?*
2. *Am I using language that prioritizes equity?*
3. *Am I building capacity for others within the school to become more equity-focused?*
4. *Have I created the necessary systems and processes to support my team as we build a more equitable school?*
5. *Am I prioritizing my own self-care to lead more effectively?*

Tapping into a network of support for yourself, and for your team, is equally important. Hearing stories of how other school leaders are leading for equity can be a source of inspiration as well as new strategies and solutions to consider.

Listen intently and create systems for feedback

An equity-focused leader considers the impact of decision-making on historically marginalized groups. Strong leaders seek out the voices of traditionally underrepresented groups in decision-making bodies: from staff who are paid hourly and often not present in staff meetings to the parents working multiple jobs who are unable to attend evening events or accompany their children to morning drop off.

Teachers also want to be heard and understood, citing opportunities to share their voices and participate more fully in school-based decisions as critical aspects of any retention efforts.¹¹ One way for equity-driven leaders to prioritize listening is to create feedback systems¹² that are safe for students and teachers to share ideas, voice concerns, or report an incident they perceive was handled unfairly. When there is a focus on everyone's voices being heard, your school community will take notice. Taking the time to engage in conversations about equity—the current state, goals, and what steps need to be taken—unifies a school community around a common goal. Creating a shared sense of community is yet another reason why teachers choose to remain in their role.¹³

“**School leaders are change agents.**”
—Tamara Littlejohn, School Leader, Chicago

Lead the Change You Want to See

Equity work is complex and multi-faceted. There is no finish line. Making peace with that truth—and continuing to do the work anyway—is an important part of your leadership journey. Confronting inequities may be new and uncomfortable. Or, conversely, it may be frustrating to wait for others to “catch up” and understand the urgency. Either way, you need to persist and find ways to support yourself along the way. Making time and prioritizing your own professional learning and growth is one of the most important actions school leaders can take. Invest in your own leadership—and you’ll inspire others to do better too.

11. Albert Shanker Institute. (2015). The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/state-teacher-diversity-executive-summary>

12. Williams, Chandra. (2019, June). 5 Practical ways for school leadership to prioritize equity. <https://www.studentachievementsolutions.com/5-practical-ways-for-school-leadership-to-prioritize-equity>

13. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). 2003. Why Great Teachers Stay. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/why-great-teachers-stay>

Strengthen Your Leadership

Our virtual Principal Coaching services provide confidential, trusted thought partnership and feedback for individual school leaders, including assistant principals. Each coaching session utilizes a cycle of inquiry to drive deep thinking and build your capacity to reflect, analyze, problem-solve independently, and achieve personal growth goals. Learn from our expert coaches, all of whom are former school and district leaders, and zero in on equity or a focus area of importance to you.

[Explore Our Coaching Services](#)

www.newleaders.org/programs/principal-coaching



Build Stronger Leadership Teams

Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) are a powerful vehicle for driving collective action—and developing leadership capacity in your school is a proven way to retain high-quality teachers. Learn how to build a high-performing team and give your ILT members the support they need to chart a course forward.

[Discover ILT Summits](#)

www.newleaders.org/programs/iltsummits

Get started today: Connect with our Partner Engagement Team at partnerships@newleaders.org.

About New Leaders

New Leaders builds the capacity of equity-minded school leaders who are committed to the success of every child. Our leaders remove barriers to success for underestimated and underserved students, supporting students in fully realizing their futures as the next generation of great thinkers, innovators, and leaders for our society.

In 20 years, we have trained more than 8,000 equity-focused leaders—sixty percent of whom identify as leaders of color. Our leaders impact more than 2 million students in our K-12 school system annually and serve as powerful and positive forces for change in their communities.

Our thanks and appreciation to the Barr Foundation, Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College with whom we are collaborating on school leader diversity research that will be released in fall 2022. That research inspired this series of papers which include quotes from alumni across these institutions.