

Equity-Minded Leadership: How School Leaders Make Meaning of Building Mindsets and Practices

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To enhance society through equitable educational attainment, efforts are being made in school districts to investigate practices and student data to provide more equitable opportunities for the students and families they serve. Given the importance of school leaders and their impact on student achievement and school climate (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004), it is imperative to understand how school leaders develop and sustain mindsets and behaviors toward equity. This study highlights the Superintendent's efforts around equity using focus groups and individual interviews with school administrators.

Keywords: *School leader, equity, educational administration, school principal*

To enhance equality in society through equitable educational attainment, efforts are being made in school districts across the nation to investigate current practices and student data with the goal of providing more equitable opportunities for the students and families they serve. Given the importance of school leaders and their impact on student achievement and school climate (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004), it is imperative to understand how school leaders develop and sustain mindsets and behaviors of schools or personnel toward equity. Successful (and, conversely, underperforming) principals can impact teaching and student achievement; and these effects are likely to be the greatest in underperforming schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). Further, in their study of schools of excellence through a lens of Hoy's academic optimism, Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, and Urban (2011) noted, "the outcomes of interest are better in schools where principals support, model, and monitor a teamwork approach, a balanced approach, a strong sense of purpose, and an insistent disposition to assure that all students are served well and that all are encouraged to perform at their highest level" (p. 57).

Since 2015, school leaders in Southeastern Virginia have worked collaboratively throughout their region to deepen understanding and enhance efforts to intentionally improve success for all students using an equity mindset. Division leaders coordinated two regional conferences for superintendents, school board members, and hundreds of school administrators. Together, these school leaders explored interventions, shared strategies, and developed personalized plans to implement in their schools and offices. The conferences were grounded in the work of Blankstein, Noguera, and Kelly (2016) that focused on five principles of leading for equity including, "getting to your core, making organizational meaning, ensuring constancy and consistency of purpose, facing the facts and your fears, and building sustainable relationships."

The school division that is the focus of this study has been making equity work an intentional priority for the past several years. Under the direction of their Superintendent, there was a non-negotiable expectation that all school leaders incorporate equity concepts and interventions to meet the unique needs of their schools and offices. This expectation was communicated at several points over a two-year span with participation and outcomes monitored through analysis of subgroup proportionality in academic and behavioral measures such as graduation and completion rates, participation in rigorous coursework, disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. These intentional actions not only resulted in more awareness and conversations being held about the specific needs at each school, but also in more proportional representation in rigorous classes at the high school level, a more intentionally equitable approach in identifying students' giftedness, and a shift in the mindset of the school leaders who have embraced this work. This study highlights the impact the Superintendent's efforts around equity had on the students, its school leaders, and the school division. Researchers gathered data from focus groups and individual interviews with school administrators from throughout the division.

Literature Review

The United States of America was founded on the principle of equality, and public education is an important vehicle in propagating equality. Equity in public education breeds equality in society, and the lack of equity in public education exacerbates societal inequality (Oaks, 2005; Sacks, 2007; US Department of Labor, 2017; Vallas, 2009; World Bank Group, 2018; Yeskel, 2008). To break the cycle of social inequity, public education must ensure equal opportunity to all citizens regardless of background or demographics. Disproportionate exposure to educational rigor can decrease realization of individual potential and limit upward mobility through higher education,

the workforce, and the military (David, 2008; Education Trust, 2010; Parker, Ciluffo, & Sapler, 2017; US Department of Labor, 2017). Great strides have been made in enhancing educational equity; however, demographic factors still affect educational experience (Nation's Report Card, 2017). Stratification of students is a social, educational, financial, and moral problem (World Bank Group, 2018) that must be addressed through enhancing equity in public education and ensuring each child is provided opportunity to reach his or her potential (Oliver, 2012). Not only does each student prosper when provided support in reaching individual potential, the school also benefits through enhanced performance on multiple school-wide measures (Blankstein, Noguera, Kelly, & Tutu, 2015).

United States educators have increasingly embraced the undertaking of educating the country's diverse population (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Title 1, 1967). Educational initiatives have driven the focus in public schools and mandated improved student learning for many generations (Rowlett, 2013). Accountability systems, often federally mandated through legislation such as No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, are now in place to encourage equity in public education. These legislative actions encourage educators to seek best practices that meet the needs of today's diverse classroom populations. For some time, school officials have realized the importance of monitoring the progress of student subgroups (Rowlett, 2013); they are now beginning to value the heterogeneity within subgroups and striving to understand and meet the unique needs of individual students.

Impact of Leadership

Social justice development, as it pertains to education, starts with a philosophical or conceptual framework discussion of the practical view of what social justice is in education. Social justice is concerned with examining situations in which individuals are marginalized to seek ways to include students who are traditionally segregated (Theoharis, 2007). Based on a continuum of changing perceptions or assumptions for promoting social action, social justice involves critical evaluations of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ability (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Social justice leadership interrupts oppressive school practices to empower student groups historically disenfranchised (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2017). This occurs through holistic and authentic approaches that require a knowing of one's self, empathy including passion, understanding, and interconnectedness, and the ability to value other people's lived experiences to move closer to critical consciousness. (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2017).

Through transformational leadership, administrators can serve as catalysts in realizing equity. Extant literature emphasizes the importance of principal leadership in encouraging change and improving student outcomes through high-impact intentions, such as equity (Caudle, 2014; Hattie, 2015; Velasco, Edmondson, and Slate, 2012; Walker & Slear, 2011). Leaders are charged with providing the necessary resources, instructional support, communication, visible presence, and atmosphere to support effective and engaging teaching (Caudle, 2014) and are thus often recognized for the failure or success of the school (Tui, 2016). However, school success is also directly attributed to the school leaders' being student-centered (Hill, 2014). Principals must, therefore, intentionally establish a culture of equity within their building that ensures individual student needs are understood and met. By promoting talented individuals from all demographic groups, school and district leaders are then better positioned to understand a wide variety of student needs, enhancing each student's chance to succeed educationally, economically, and socially (Blankstein, Noguera, Kelly, & Tutu, 2015).

While ensuring student and school success is the principal's responsibility, it cannot be accomplished alone. The principal must enlist the support of stakeholders by establishing a shared vision for improvement (Tui, 2016). Through clarity, collaboration, example, and encouragement, principals can establish a learning environment permeated with caring adults supporting student needs. The influence of caring staff members is a notable consideration in equity endeavors; when students feel understood and valued, their behaviors and choices change (McCormick & O'Conner, 2015). When teachers and counselors respond to principal expectations and encouragement, equity is enhanced in areas such as rigorous coursework participation rates (Porter, 2017).

School Climate

As adult and student behaviors transform, the school's organizational climate is enhanced. This positive school climate plays an essential role in reaching current educational requirements and attaining thriving school improvement outcomes (Velasco et al., 2012). Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) named the combined impact of collective efficacy, faculty trust, and an academic emphasis as academic optimism. As schools seek to achieve positive school climate and a culture of academic optimism, the impact on the overall learning environment improves. Students learning in a culture of equity, where expectation for success is prevalent, are more likely to strive for and achieve higher academic outcomes such as participation and success in rigorous coursework and exams (Pearson, 2014). Positive school climate can be leveraged to enhance equity in academic achievement (Maxwell, Reynolds, Less, Sobsiac, & Broomhead, 2017). Schools where students feel safe, engaged, and connected to their teachers have smaller wealth-predicted disparities in academic achievement and enable more social mobility. Equity-enhancing climate can be facilitated through engaging activities, relationship building, anti-bullying policies, and consistent discipline among racial and ethnic groups (Blad, 2016).

Administrative professional standards indicate that educational leaders are expected to maintain educational settings that demonstrate equity and cultural responsiveness (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, 2015). To do so, administrators must not only ensure a positive school climate that encourages belonging among all students, they must also ensure equitable instruction, participation, and achievement. Efforts to provide instruction appropriate for each student, often called differentiated, individualized, or personalized instruction, assist in addressing racial inequality through recognition of heterogeneity among and within races. Investigating the success of each student and providing equity-inducing interventions with consideration of the student's response to those interventions furthers a school's ability to provide instruction appropriate for each child, thus fostering equity. When participation and achievement gaps exist within schools, efforts should be made to diminish and eventually eliminate them. Some students do not know they have the potential until someone who believes in their abilities tells them they do (College Board, 2014). While challenges persist, benefits are attained when educators proactively seek to ensure educational equity through increased participation in advanced level courses (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). Principals seeking to increase proportional representation in rigorous coursework should consider sharing specific data reflecting their school's representation rates with their faculty and setting goals to diminish any participation and achievement gaps that exist. The principal should provide frequent, systematic, and intentional efforts throughout the school year using a variety of staff members to encourage students who may not otherwise enroll in advanced courses (Porter, 2017).

Great schools are child-centered learning environments where human dignity is valued. When principals establish a culture of respect for diversity and individualized student support, achievement soars. When school leaders and staff combine relationships with data-informed decision making, they improve the outcomes for their students (Porter, 2017).

Methodology

This study relied on qualitative data analyzed through an interpretive research paradigm to explore central office and school level administrator perspectives on the journey being made toward increased equity in a school division in the southeastern part of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Building level and central office level administrators were oriented into the equity journey through seminars, regional equity conferences, and planning meetings. Data for the study were collected via individual interviews and focus groups.

Research Site

The school division serves over 39,000 students in a community of approximately 234,000 residents. It is a suburban school division located near military bases and has 47 public schools serve the city which is comprised of urban, suburban, and rural overlay districts bridging the divide between a large urban center and a rural community. The school district serves a student body that is 49% White, 33% Black, 8% Hispanic, 7% two or more races, and 2% Asian. All other races comprised less than 1 % of the student population. Students with disabilities comprised 16 % of the student population, economically disadvantaged students 36 %, and English Language Learners 3 %. The division is located near several military bases; 1990 of the students come from active duty military families.

The community is located near colonial settlements and is thus steeped in history. As part of the U.S. South, some of the region's history presents an obstacle to educational equity. Current members of the community have first-hand experience with Massive Resistance, and many of these citizens may have children teaching in the division and grandchildren or great-grandchildren attending schools in the division. The community, nestled between an urban center and rural expanse, must overcome equity issues associated with both urban and rural constituencies and appreciate the need for different approaches to equity in schools at the urban end of the city compared to schools in suburban or rural portions of the city.

Research Team

The research was completed by a four-member research team consisting of one higher education representative from outside the school division and three persons working within the school division. The design of the research team brought a distinct perspective to the research due to the access afforded the research team because three members of the research team had been members of the school division for many years in multiple roles and understood the narrative of the division's story. The representatives from inside the school division, through their embedded roles, could provide a unique lens to the equity journey and provide valuable perspective to the process of enhancing equity. Their inside knowledge was an asset to the research being conducted. The higher education representative could bring an additional perspective outside the division to develop a comprehensive narrative. The higher education representative had been

involved in the development of the regional equity conferences, providing insight into the school division equity journey. The four-member team increased the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the research data and decreased researcher bias.

Participants

Participants for the study were division administrators predominately from the division equity steering committee; additional participants were also invited based upon significant strides made with equity initiatives in their schools. The administration equity committee was charged with steering the division equity efforts and planning one of the regional equity conferences. The committee was chosen by the Superintendent, the Superintendent's cabinet, and central office directors. The research team acknowledges the potential for a homogenous sample in that those chosen were already engaged in these efforts. Future research might explore those who did not self-select involvement in equity efforts, aside from their typical job responsibilities. Administrators participating in the study were contacted by email, and those interested in participating selected a focus group interview or individual interview. Participants consisted of two Black males, six Black females, four White males, and 10 White females. The research questions used to direct the study were:

1. How do educational leaders make meaning of equity in their work?
2. What knowledge, dispositions, and practices do they leverage and value?

Research questions for the study set the parameters for the interview question creation. For the individual interviews, 13 questions were created (See Appendix A). For the focus group interviews, five questions were asked of the participants with one researcher facilitating the conversation and one observing and the other as a silent observer to the nonverbal cues, participant demeanor, and overall behaviors of the participants individually and within the group. Focus group interviews were conducted at a time and location decided by the research team. Individual interviews were conducted by one member of the research team at a time and location determined by the interviewee.

All interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and transcribed by an outside transcription agency. After transcription, each member of the team engaged in initial data coding for all interviews and focus groups. From this initial open coding the research team discussed the emerging themes challenging and expanding each other's perspective using the context of the interviews and participants' words as guidance. This included the evolution of the belief systems administrators encountered intrinsically and extrinsically, the lessons learned, outcomes of the equity journey as described by the participants as they engaged in their equity work, and future steps proposed for their equity journey.

Findings

In answering the two research questions focused on how leaders make meaning of equity in their work. The knowledge, dispositions, and practices educational leaders found valuable in doing uncovered two main thematic categories. First, participants described how they have built the foundation for the work through relationships, an organizational focus, common language, expected mindset and behaviors, and moved beyond seeing the students as subgroups to the individual. Second, participants described how they will sustain the efforts by breaking down barriers and building bridges and articulating next steps.

Part I: Building the Foundation

Relationships. The most salient, foundational consistency among all focus groups and interviews was the importance of authentic relationships with students, staff, and other stakeholders. By building respect and understanding for one another and learning the personal stories of those who are showing signs of struggle, administrators and staff were better able to personalize support for students and one another. Administrators mentioned the need to have courageous conversations to spark relationship building and develop an appreciation of human individuality. One administrator quoted James Comer, saying “No significant learning takes place without relationships.” Another indicated the importance of trust saying, “It goes up a level when you've got that trust and love and people enjoy working for you and enjoy working together. That just makes it even better for kids.”

A principal mentioned the powerful impact educators have on students' lives when students realize an adult is pushing for their success. “Knowing that people care for them and are trying to get them to be in a better place” positively impacts students' lives. When asked how each of these administrators became leaders, nearly all mentioned key teachers, great mentors, good leadership models, and feeling comfortable and supported in school. By intentionally providing these interpersonal supports to today's students, they are forwarding the cycle of success and building leadership potential. There is power in having teachers that “believe in teaching students and not subjects...individuals that wanted you to find that genius that was instilled deep inside of you.”

Relationships are developed in a culture of humility and respect established through leadership modeling, conversations, and clear expectations. One leader said, “This work is all about moving one step closer to our kids and changing the world one student at a time. That is what we are all about.” Leaders are encouraged to lead by example and “be the model you want others to see” and “understand the importance of every job in the school.” Many mentioned the importance of being approachable and open-minded with those they serve. It is important to support and encourage one another in building leadership capacity, which will have a positive impact on the teachers and students throughout the division. During focus group conversations, the researchers noticed this humility and inner-organizational desire to learn from one another.

Organizational Focus and Senior Leadership Commitment. Superintendent leadership for equity is complex due to the organizational, personal, and occupational contexts they encounter during their tenure as superintendent (Roegman, R., 2017). Context matters as superintendents seek difficult equity-focused leadership in their districts (Roegman, R., 2017). The Superintendent established equity as a priority in this school division and provided many division leaders with common experiences prior to this research. Numerous professional development opportunities provided focus on the concept of equity. Central office administrators worked to initiate conversations with building administrators regarding the importance of meeting individual student needs with an equity mindset. These conversations were expected to be emulated at the building level. The district administrators worked collaboratively with eleven neighboring districts in two annual “Excellence through Equity” regional conferences attended by all the participating district's administrators.

These conversations evolved into equity plans of action at the building level. During the focus groups and interviews, administrators shared specific equity outcomes they planned to address in their buildings; reducing the number of office referrals and suspensions, better proportional representation in AP, honors, gifted identification and special education. One administrator stated “We expect every one of them [students] to meet our expectations and we're

going to do whatever we can to bring them to our expectation. We're never going to lower the expectations, but we're going to do everything we can to give them [students] the resources that they need to achieve and not only to achieve here, but to be prepared to compete once they go out into the real world.”

A Common Definition. After establishing the division-wide priority of equity and identifying specific outcomes where equity needed to be addressed, the division recognized the importance of having a common definition of equity for all to consider and used “Providing students what they need to be successful academically and socially.” The following personalized descriptions of equity demonstrate the mindset expected throughout the division in bringing the culture of equity to the teacher and student level. Administrators in this study shared these descriptions of what equity meant to them:

- Making sure you are doing your job for everyone.
- You’ve got to look at what each child needs and meet them at their needs with an understanding that not all students need the same things, the same resources, the same teachers.
- Making sure that we provide exactly what students need in order to meet success.
- We are no longer just teaching the masses.
- Equity isn’t always equality.
- It’s a mindset. It’s a culture shift.
- Looking at where that student is now, and where they want to be, and what is it that we need to provide for that student to get that student to that goal.
- Always keeping in mind that all students don’t have the same goal. They don’t all start from the same place.
- Equity means getting everybody to reach their potential.
- It’s reaching those kids who aren’t learning for whatever reason.
- Equity is removing obstacles or barriers to ensure that all students are on a level playing ground.
- It's not leaving anybody behind.
- Equity is one step at a time. It's one conversation at a time. It's reflection. You know, over and over and over again. And it's a lot of trust that if we do what's right for kids, then we're going to improve our practice.

Expected Mindset. The Superintendent made it very clear that equity may look different in every school and department throughout the division. An administrator observed, “We're all at different places in this idea of equity, and we have to recognize that everybody else that we interact with is at different levels, different resistance, different acceptance, and meeting people where they are in that particular level and offer them the resources or the options.” The division’s next step was getting every administrator on board with this work. As the division developed common language and beliefs, they unified their voices and were better able to work together to establish a culture of equity.

In the words of study participants, “The things we have in common are a passion for kids and education. I think every single one of us believes this is our life’s work.” There is value “treating people respectfully and with dignity. Everybody has a story. Everybody has humanity. They want to do well. Our job is to help them.” “By clarifying that we have an expected mindset inclusive of equity, we enable our students and staff to rise to “both the standards and the expectations for our students.” Participants gave examples of this enacted such as important

conversations on equity, grading practices, interaction with families, and deep examination to determine root causes.

Expected Behaviors. In this school district, clear directions and expectations were provided by the Superintendent and his staff. To set the tone, administrators understood that in “every single situation, there are multiple opportunities to create a more equitable environment.” One division expectation was engaging in courageous conversations that brought differing perspectives to the forefront. “Some of the conversations are hard. Some of the conversations are very easy.” Ensuring this equitable environment relies heavily upon the opportunity and willingness to bounce ideas off one another and a willingness to do something different until you find what works to reach the students.

In conversations led by central office administrators over the course of two years, building administrators were provided opportunities to solidify expected equity behaviors. Trainers took time to teach the behaviors, vocabulary, and expectations. They differentiated instruction for elementary, middle, and high school administrators and gave opportunities for trainees to reflect and collaborate with one another. Additionally, participants analyzed specific school and division data with equity in mind.

The model used to train leaders was then utilized at the building level. Administrators discussed with teachers how to best approach and encourage students. Through personal and professional connections with students, teachers were able to embrace the students’ uniqueness, provide quality differentiated instruction, and meet individual needs. Administrators indicated a need to get “teachers to be open and receptive to engaging and interacting with students from many walks of life.” They also discussed the vulnerability of sharing stories, as one principal said, “We are trying to personalize it for our staff, being brave enough to share our own stories of who we are and where we came from; share the challenges that we've encountered and allowing our staff to share those challenges too.” Another administrator reported, “It is an evolving story in our school, but we are moving forward. Whenever we hit resistance, we tried to be respectful, but at the same time, we were showing data, having personal conversations, and talking about the benefits of building those relationships.” Another principal said,

When they walk through the halls or they come through the doors, they belong to us. We spend just as much time, if not more, than their parents or guardians spend with them. It's our job to let them know there is nothing that you can't achieve. It doesn't matter what you look like. It doesn't matter what your socioeconomic status is. It doesn't matter whether you get free or reduce lunch. It doesn't matter. You can achieve all of your goals if you're willing to invest. If you can, invest in your school. Your school is going to invest in you. Together, we work in achieving your goals. The sky is the limit.

Beyond the Group to the Individual. Initial conversations led school leaders to expand the concept of equity. “It's looking at somebody specifically and individually. Are we making sure that we are giving them what they need?” As mental health issues, drug addiction, and bullying spill over into education, students are coming to school with a different set of circumstances. “Equity is really looking at the landscape of the child. Where they've been, what they're bringing to the table, and then trying to advocate for doing things differently. Trying to say, ‘Just because we've always done it this way doesn't mean it's the right way.’ What can we do to really look at the student?”

These conversations obviated a shift in mindset “We never looked at data or kids this way before.” “We've spent 15 years telling teachers to teach the standard, to focus on the content to the exclusion of developing the relationships.” Now, administrators in this study reported

conversations asking, “Tell me the story of this child. What do you know about this child?” “That number is important but you don’t focus on that as much as you focus on the stories behind that number.”

Schools began looking at subgroup data for improvement and accreditation purposes years ago, but this division recognized that equity groups expanded beyond the traditional gap groups. Although income, race, English Language Learners, and special education status remain important subsets of the student population that need to be supported and monitored, division leaders identified additional groupings that must be considered when ensuring equity. Study participants also identified students from military families, those living with extended family members, children with overprotective parents, youth who are gay or transgender, learners from unhappy homes, those suffering from high anxiety or trauma, and victims of parental codependence. These unique subgroups may necessitate new supports; for example, students with overprotective parents may have developed learned helplessness and may need to learn to be independent and have self-confidence. This work ultimately revealed that needs within any subgroup vary and must be explored at the individual level.

This appreciation for individuality extended beyond the student level, to the staff level as well. Tiered supports must be provided at all levels of the organization. Students, staff and administrators each bring a different set of strengths and have varying needs. “We really do need to find ways to tailor the needs of staff so that we can accomplish the ultimate goal of equity and achievement for our students. Teachers and other employees enter their work at different places of readiness. Just recognizing that and providing the same thing to everyone will not get us where we need to be.”

Administrators must be cognizant of staff differences and “make sure they have what they need so that they can do their job.” This may require differentiated professional development and conversations. “It didn’t need to be a school wide in-service session on how to write fewer referrals. It needed to be conversations with five teachers who are writing 75% of our referrals. And to give them more tools to be able to resolve conflicts with their students. Or it needed to be those five, or those ten students who needed to have a mentor, so that they could have a place to explode in a professional way, or in an appropriate way, and not in a classroom.”

As individual staff needs were accommodated, they began personalizing supports at the student level. Staff utilized focus groups and PLC to “talk about kids very intentionally” and to develop a plan for intervention, extension, or whatever that child needed. They discussed “what’s really happening in our classrooms? What can we do differently to try and help students be successful?” Even in high-performing schools, there are students, be they few, who are not yet successful. Equity work ensures that supports are extended to those students. “If we’re only talking about 10, 15, or 20 kids...that matters to the 15 or 20 kids.”

Part II: Developing the Continued Journey Through Equity

Infusing equity throughout a school division is not an overnight process. It takes time and must be done intentionally. The administrative challenge is to create a division-wide vision that helps the building leaders understand the importance of equity and the why behind equity work. The division in the study needed to strategically plan for the roll out of the equity work to ensure that support from the top of the organization would reach students in every classroom. This division began their equity journey by providing administrative training combined with collaborative

efforts with other leaders from throughout the region to bring in experts and provide a venue for discussions and growth around equity.

As administrators began taking what they learned from the training to the building level, they determined that the process for ensuring equity was different in every setting. They described it as a process that needed to “be nurtured” and “grown slowly”, and in some cases subtly, until it became part of the school’s culture. The culture and climate in the building drive the speed and specifics of equity work. It is the administrator’s responsibility to ensure that the culture and climate gradually shift toward a more equitable mindset. When a large gap exists between the school’s current climate and the climate needed to ensure each student’s success, the pace of the work needs to be adapted along the way. Administrators also identified the need for time, money, and training to be dedicated to these efforts. “I’ve gotta have time to make a big deal out of it and I’ve gotta be able to spend the time working with my staff and listening to my staff...it’s gotta be something you nurture and it grows”

Administrators realized that as they listened to their staff, enriched relationships, and built trust, adults in the building began to “feel comfortable coming in to talk about whatever the issue might be. They might come in upset or mad or looking for support, and then have a little bit more awareness when they leave.” As the conversations became more frequent and natural, “it became less taboo to talk about” equity, and growth was evident. “We started out really small and we’ve grown that and it’s just amazing to see the culture in this building and how it shifted when it comes to focusing on desired behaviors and things we want to see...and reinforcing positive behaviors as opposed to attending to the negative.” This work allowed leaders to move conversations from “We are doing well, you should be so proud.” to “How can we be better?”

Obtaining Teacher Buy-In. Some staff members were “more accepting of the equity discussions” than others. Each teacher’s level of respect toward his/her leader may play into their acceptance of the common goal. For those who are not accepting, administrators must be patient and continue to model reflective practices and passion for individual student success. Although administrators realized the importance of establishing buy-in among all adults in the building: teachers, custodians, the nurse, support staff, and clerical staff, “if you sat around and wait for everybody to be on board you would probably not get anything done.”

Leaders must ensure teachers that equity does not lower expectations, it means helping individual students rise to expectations. “The biggest challenge is changing the mindset of some of our staff members, who may not realize that they’re bringing their own personal experiences or baggage to the table. These experiences impact their instructional techniques.” By better understanding their own story and those of the students, they are better able to realize “the way that they’re teaching may not be the best way for every student in that classroom or they might assume that students have these experiences that they’re coming to the table with and take things for granted.” The connection to the individual is a critical step needed for quality equity work to reach all students.

As the work progressed, administrators noted that teachers “mentioned a need to know more about what’s going on with the kids outside of school. Teachers haven’t asked for that information before.” Administrators in the study are now reporting teachers asking, “What does that look like in my classroom? And what do you need me to do to make that happen? They want to know, How do I make this happen in my class? What do I need to do in terms of differentiation? What do I need to do in terms of making sure students who are of other races, or ethnicities, or orientations feel comfortable in my classroom? I think I am making them feel that way, but how do I know that I’m making them feel that way?”

As teachers begin reflecting on these questions, there was a palpable “shift from the administrator saying, ‘This is what we are going to do for these groups’ to teachers asking ‘What do we need to do for these kids?’” This shift in thinking opens the door for administrators to introduce data and research. “I spent a lot of time last year collecting data, looking at data critically, talking to teachers, and seeing what teachers had to say, what they understood about equity, talking to students on our in-service days. I sent a lot of surveys out. I was trying just to gather as much information as I could about discipline, about student perception, about school culture, about teacher perception, about our scores, everything that I could get my hands on.”

Breaking Down Barriers and Building Bridges. Understanding the barriers principals face in promoting equity in their schools is essential. “Understanding the kinds of resistance, the levels of resistance, and the ongoing nature of resistance allows leaders to anticipate and steel themselves as they commit to an equity-oriented agenda (Theoharis, 2008). While changes in teacher mindsets and openness toward individual student stories were encouraging to the division on their path toward equity, there were also barriers that hindered progress. A major barrier that some leaders faced was denial that inequity existed. There were teachers that did not believe some students experienced school and life differently than others. There were staff members who did not yet recognize the role their own personal experiences played in their perception of others and how those perceptions affected their interactions.

Employees at high-performing schools were often slow to accept the need for equity work: test scores were high, benchmarks were met, and the clear majority of students were successful—and were nonminority. In these schools, the need for equity came as an epiphany, highlighting the importance of everyone, even when the group excelled. Teachers were challenged to look beyond the success of the many to identify and support the few still in need.

Administrators and staff at different places in their own equity journey also affected the division’s journey. No two schools were alike. Each had a unique history and group dynamic. “There’s no one solution to fix the equity issue because every community is so different and the needs are so different.” “To say that all schools have embraced this would not be an accurate statement.” The division was tasked with determining what was non-negotiable throughout the city and what was flexible within and among schools by acknowledging while all were working toward equity and proportionality, that each school and staff had unique needs.

Administrators identified the variety of staff backgrounds and perspectives as another barrier in the path to equity. “I think that in my work, the toughest thing that I have to do is get past the fact that we all come with our own biases and breaking down our own personal walls to really get down to the root of what a person needs in order to be successful.” “There are people who cannot see the problem. They don’t see it as a problem. It’s just not something that they connect with.” “This is a very difficult and sensitive process. Not everyone is going to be able to embrace this with open arms because it really forces everyone to look at themselves. I think that having the courage to do that, as a division and as individual schools, speaks volumes for us.”

The division also had to ensure that equity did not get lost among “too many initiatives, concurrently or over time.” Building administrators faced a similar barrier in struggling to create time for equity work among competing issues; “We’re wasting time that we could be using to focus on instructional issues, or trauma issues, or equity issues, because we’re keeping the building running.” Equity required intentionality on the part of administrators who were “constantly having to put fires out.” Administrators began breaking the barrier of competing issues by “presenting it in a fashion that helps people realize that it’s a culture shift. It’s not an initiative. It’s a mindset.”

The division has begun the arduous process of breaking down the barriers to equity—altering belief systems and perceptions, reducing fears, and building bridges. Administrators shared substantial indicators of the change taking place. “My vision, or the division’s vision, is becoming OUR vision. Now, my teachers are believing in the process and becoming facilitators of the process, and that is having such a positive impact on what we are trying to do.” “We are really just in the beginning stages. I’m very proud of what we’ve accomplished thus far. I don’t know if we can consider ourselves successful yet.” “We are in the making. We are a work in progress...I know we have the courage to do this work, and I’m proud of that.”

Defining the Future. There is evidence to suggest that equity work in this school division is beginning to take hold and is resulting in a shift in mindset and beginning to impact student outcomes throughout the organization. Considering next steps is a critical step in keeping the momentum going in the right direction. This school division recognizes that there is a need for intentionality in considering the personal, social, and emotional needs of the students and staff they serve. The following steps are currently being implemented to facilitate and continue these efforts:

- Incorporate equity conversations, strategies, and reminders in various Professional Development opportunities.
- Incorporate equity goals in school improvement procedures.
- Create a district leadership team that intentionally coordinates equity, PBIS, and RtI encompassing concepts of tiered supports.
- Intertwine equity work into the existing academic tiered systems of supports framework that addresses the behavioral and academic student performance.
- Provide timely, relevant data in user-friendly formats to aid in decision-making to help determine the right supports for the right students.
- Determine ways that existing practices could be refined, combined, or streamlined to improve efficiency.
- Ensure sustainability of equity efforts as division leadership changes occur.
- Seek and share resources that building personnel could utilize as they strive to create a more equitable culture in their school, e.g., a ‘toolbox’ with ideas of resources and options for teachers and leaders to consider.

Discussion and Implications

As school leaders in this district described, two important components of leading work focused on improving equity and outcomes are how a foundation is built and the how it is sustained and nurtured. It is important to note that this journey was not seen as linear by participants, but rather as an experience that will require reboots and revisiting. As staff and leaders change, new challenges arise, and new policies are created, organizations will need to potentially rebuild the foundation and determine updated next steps.

Because organizational and societal change will alter both the equity challenges that arise and the staff addressing those challenges, a framework has been established to ensure the division has the capacity to continually cultivate equity. The framework for sustainability focuses on a tiered system of supports to address student and staff needs; a problem solving model that can be used to respond to changing student, organizational, and societal needs; and a team structure that ensures intentionality of action and coordination of efforts across the division.

A Division Leadership Team was established to ensure equity efforts proceeded from the established mindset to the classroom operational level. The team is comprised of assistant superintendents who oversee curriculum and instruction as well as student services, administrators from most central office departments (e.g., Human Resources, Special Education, Information Technology, Staff Development, Pupil Discipline, Program Evaluation, and School Improvement Planning), and building administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The team meets monthly to review data, problem solve, and plan for tiered supports to meet the needs of the district's students and staff.

The Division Leadership Team has measurably enhanced capacity for implementing tiered supports that cultivate equity and is working toward defining its role in establishing systems and practices that directly improve identified student outcomes. The tiered approach to support individual and organizational success naturally flows from the district's enhanced appreciation of diversity of background, experience, passion, and aspiration

The balance of relationships and structures emerged as critical and considering how to ensure leaders are committed to both was an important discovery. The participants in this study noted relationships as a key to building the foundation in equity work. These school leaders organically used "we" when speaking about their leadership teams and schools and most acknowledged the importance of the leader in this work through example and commitment but were humble in sharing their own success stories. The leaders in the study, in many cases, excelled in both building relationships in their own contexts, but importantly also in creating structures and expectations that took beliefs to action. These leaders were also adaptive in their actions, and able to navigate complex contexts of their district and schools.

A critical finding in both building and sustaining this work was the focus on collaboration and trust. Several participants noted that this work takes trust and time. Some also noted there is a continuum of acceptance of the need for this work. Challenging conversations with specific staff who are not consistent with the expected mindsets and behaviors of the organization were critical, but also easier when relationships and trust were firm.

Finally, beliefs are not enough. Action is necessary and the intentionality of the actions by senior leadership, leaders, teachers, and staff were noted as critical ingredients. Although indirect, influence from the senior leadership of a district permeates to school leaders who can nurture these beliefs and actions with teachers, who directly influence students and student learning.

As we considered the voice of participants, we began to envision a model for developing equity in schools and school districts. Modeled after Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, we consider each level necessary before advancing upward. The model, however, is not linear in that individuals and organizations will find they have slipped down and need to rebuild or re-engage with a level. The foundation exists with non-negotiable mindsets and behaviors that are collectively developed, and intentionally communicated. Next, trust and relationships must be built and nurtured. Third, members of the organizations must explore equity and their personal stories, which requires a sense of risk and vulnerability. Fourth, members must be guided to examine the impact of one's story on the organization and consider how the collective narrative of stories of these individuals create the tapestry that is the organization. Each of these levels work toward the apex of achieving equity for all children.



Division leaders from this school district created and modeled the use of resources and training materials for building-level leaders. Following the administrative trainings, building-level leaders were provided copies of all materials for their consideration and potential use in their schools. Some building-level leaders were comfortable providing training using the materials provided. Other building principals called on the division trainers to help facilitate equity training(s) for their teachers and staff based on specific needs at each setting. These precise, intentional steps resulted in visible shifts where beliefs shifted to evidence of more equitable actions observed in the schools.

Recommendations

Analyzing how one school district made the journey to increased equity will assist other educational leaders in creating a plan for equity for their division or school. This analysis can support school leaders in understanding the complexities of the equity issues faced by student groups and their communities and provide insight for school leaders into how to meet those needs. Influencing the perspectives of educators, students, and communities by building an equity mindset is necessary to bring real change and a more equitable educational environment for all students.

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

For those that could attend a college or university, exposure to differing perspectives, other than the one they had growing up within their community and cultural group, is imperative to their human growth. This exposure is not to determine how the citizenry should view the world but to

provide varying perspectives to expand their thinking. Colleges and universities influence a portion of the next generation of citizens and therefore have a responsibility to their students and the world to expand thinking through exposure to varying perspectives. This extends beyond future educators to all programs offered and has increasing importance as the demographics of this country continue to change and the world becomes more globalized. Cultural tolerance, and an understanding of social justice will be necessary for effectiveness in all career paths but especially critical to educators.

All teacher and leadership education classes should have equity embedded. Society is changing therefore, so are public schools. Increased diversity should not incite fear, but promise and opportunity to seek increased understanding of different cultures. How can we effectively teach and seek authentic relationships with parents and teachers if we do not seek to explore our cultural and racial perceptions? School and district leaders cannot put structures in place to ensure equity without knowledge of their personal perceptions and how these academic and nonacademic beliefs may assist or hinder their ability to raise the expectations and performance for all students.

Colleges and universities must develop culturally responsive, authentic leaders. Authentic leaders know themselves and their perspectives as well as how each impacts their decision-making. These leaders build relationships and trust among their stakeholders while challenging perspectives and how they view each other to build a climate of understanding and humanity. Leaders must have a passion for this work along with a clear vision and common vocabulary embedded throughout their equity initiatives. These leaders must possess the ability to examine data as a way of starting the conversation in a non-threatening environment that is safe for open conversations but consider that data also has a face as we see students within their culture but also as individuals. Leaders must be adaptive and recognize the need for non-negotiables but be adaptive and flexible in the process, knowing this work is a journey and there will be stakeholders that will resist the process. Leaders must overcome barriers that arise by leaning on the relationships and trust among stakeholders, to develop and implement effective equity action plans.

Future educators must face their perceptions and beliefs. In this way, education leaders can build capacity for instilling equity in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Education programs can utilize autobiographies or journals recording incidents of inequitable policies, procedures, discourses, and practices, hopefully, leading to improved education outcomes (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). Colleges and universities must lead the way, in ensuring future teachers and school leaders expand their equity mindset.

Recommendations for Practice

Courageous school leadership at the district and school levels is required to build equity in the public school system. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) theorized,

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what they hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility...people push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. (p. 2)

Establishing equity requires a plan that may make internal and external stakeholders uncomfortable. Structuring relationship building, data sharing, action planning, and

communication among stakeholders must be a part of the plan to build momentum toward equity. Structured planning, transparent action, community involvement, and data analysis will further the progress toward equitable outcomes.

Trust matters and takes time. Trust is essential to the relationship between the leader and those they lead (Beard, 2013), and building that trust among all stakeholders must be an intentional focus. Public school districts must hire and promote leaders who are deeply aware of their how they think and behave in context, (Beard, 2013, p. 102) and are therefore able to develop that trust, establish authentic relationships, and have courageous conversations that create critical consciousness. They must seek teachers and leaders who appreciate stories of other staff members, students, parents, and the community and build empathy of each other's lived experience. Employers who understand the value of relationships and the critical nature of equity will further the success of students, staff, schools, and districts. Leaders must model expected behaviors and build systems and structures to support the work and overcome the barriers that exist.

School divisions can begin the equity journey by having administrators examine their own ideologies, prejudices, and biases they bring to their school before introducing equity to their teachers and staff. To be an effective school leader as the population becomes more diverse, leaders must understand their biases and know how to assist others in facing theirs, to provide a school environment with equitable power. This cannot be a superficial process but a true analysis of their thinking and their ability to recognize theirs and others biases. By keeping equity journals (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015) or experience videos (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2017), school leaders can examine and record instances of racism and other inequities in all their environments especially in schools to raise their awareness and build critical consciousness. Systematic discussions of incidents of inequity and ways to avoid them can assist in building an equity mindset.

School leaders must understand oppressive forces and discourses that lead to social and cultural reproduction in society and schools to build a social justice view of the world. This would lead to increased dialogue and construction of division and school plans to confront instances of inequities in the school environment through discourse, customs, and ideologies. Completion of this work by administrators prior to introducing it into the school environment will raise not only their awareness but also comfort with discussing equity issues.

In addition to working on perceptions, building administrators must create academic and nonacademic structures to improve student outcomes. Equity must be a part of the infrastructure and expectation in the school. Besides using the data highlighting gaps for students, discussion of how all students will gain academically in this process is a crucial conversation to have, with a plan of action developed from open conversations by all school actors. Teachers will ultimately decide equity success because they connect to the students, parents, community, and leadership. Without the key teachers on board helping to push the initiative of equity, it will fail. Not all personnel have to agree, but identifying the key players and having them, a part of the change process along with identifying how to implement equity within the school environment will move the process.

Data begins the discussion of which students are not achieving and whether practices exist that devalue minority students as opposed to policies that increase academic and personal self-image. Elimination of policies that bring to light the question of whether everyone should be educated and to what extent must be a priority. Instead, the question should be if students are the priority, what structures exist to ensure the academic success of all students or to limit it?

It is important that at the school and division level beliefs about equity are aligned. It must be a division focus for sustained success and consistency among schools. As administrators are transferred from school to school or to central office, how can they be effective in any school or central office positions without the knowledge of equity and cultural awareness of how to tackle these issues. As the population in America continues to change this will be a challenge that can no longer be ignored.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several areas that require further research to help to operationalize how a school division can build more equitable practices. On the central office level examining how divisions complete the process of equity audits to analyze policies and procedures to ensure equity for the students they serve. This audit process will be the foundation of the equity work in the division and their commitment to the journey. In addition, staff development opportunities from the division level focused on equity require study into how useful the administrators find the information and how they utilize it in their school buildings and departments after the training.

Research into how school leaders build networks and relationships among teachers and staff, specifically how they support the work for the benefit of their students. Leaders and teachers need to widen their toolbox of interventions for equitable practices with a systematic structure they can develop as a part of their toolbox for equity. Also, an area to study would be principals who seek to build capacity in equity beliefs and mindsets including how they train their assistant principals to carry out this important work as the next division or building leaders.

Conclusion

As school districts grapple with how to incorporate equity work into the culture of their organization, they might consider the steps taken by the school division in this study. Working collaboratively with other school divisions and providing regular administrator training and resources proved to have a positive impact on school outcomes and resulted in more equitable mindsets being evident throughout the organization. The school division also recognizes the journey has not ended and this work will continue and impact all facets of their work.

The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, stated, “Equity efforts reflect an evolving society. Individuals from all walks of life communicate constantly, both verbally and non-verbally. These on-going interactions can enhance or humiliate, change lives for the better, or crush aspirations in their wake. Every individual has the potential to add value to our world. Therefore, we aim to implement equitable practices in every aspect of the schools and workplaces in our division.” The role the superintendent plays in incorporating equity work throughout a school division was highlighted by participants as unique and necessary. The Superintendent, said, “This is our most important work. We must account for all students. For equity to become part of a division’s culture, there needs to be true buy-in from every level of the organization. We must use data and schedule regular follow-up conversations to ensure we are having a positive impact on our students”.

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