

## Preparing Principals To Lead the Equity Agenda

**Manny Barbara**

*Oak Grove School District*

**& Marty Krovetz**

*San Jose State University*

*Abstract: This invited paper explores challenges involved in developing an equity agenda that will create school and district cultures that can effectively address issues of race that are reflected by the achievement gap. Based on a presentation at the Fall 2005 CAPEA conference, the authors explore issues that influence how school systems work and do not work for parents and students of color. The paper also addresses equity and the ways in which educators need to engage with each other and the community around issues of race in order to bring about change.*

You cannot pick up an educational journal nowadays without seeing an article about “closing the achievement gap.” Educational books abound with strategies on how to begin to address the gap. The principal of today, and increasingly in the future, will face challenges as demographics continue to shift the focus to educating more students of color. To paraphrase Gary Howard (1999), you can’t *lead* what you don’t know.

Most educators accept closing the achievement gap as a goal, at least verbally if not in action. However, student achievement as measured by

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test scores is one component, but not the sole issue to be addressed within the larger umbrella of pursuing an equity agenda. For example, it is possible to make an immediate impact on test scores in closing the achievement gap for Hispanic English Learners or Black African Nationals by teaching them English. While the test score gap may close, it will not affect the way students of color perceive themselves to be treated if a system is insensitive to their broader needs.

An equity agenda places at the forefront the goal of achieving equal outcomes among the various racial groups, and specifically improving the outcomes for African American and Hispanic students. An equity agenda acknowledges that students enter the education system with differing needs and that the way resources are distributed can impact outcomes. It acknowledges that the group performance outcomes achieved within the public education system are indeed unequal, and that if resources are distributed equally or evenly, uneven outcomes will only continue and potentially increase. Furthermore, the distribution of resources (e.g. money, quality of facilities, quality of teaching) is seen as a variable within the organization's control, which can help reduce this "gap." The federal government already acknowledges an equity agenda through Title 1 funds distributed to schools meeting specified socioeconomic demographic criteria. We are only talking about the degree that we consider equity issues important.

The following constructs are suggested as essential learnings for principals to lead an equity agenda at a school that will help close the achievement gap. The idea presented reflects the perspective of White administrators speaking to other White administrators.

### It's a Systems Issue . . . Not Just the Principal

Why is an equity agenda focusing on closing the achievement gap important? Closing the achievement gap is the challenge, even moral obligation, of public education. No matter what data are analyzed, the achievement gap between African American/Hispanic students, and White/Asian students confronts us as the critical issue within society (North Central Region Educational Laboratory, 2004). While charging public schools alone with this challenge may be unfair (Evans, 2005), leading an equity agenda *within* a school district is within reach.

However, a school by itself, and by proxy, a principal by him or herself, is especially challenged to pursue an equity agenda unless it is perceived as the primary *district* mission as well. A school exists within a system. A principal cannot be expected to succeed in achieving equity unless it is also an expressed priority of the district. Of course, "district"

is often used as an abstract concept, but in reality reflects the vision and priority as established by the board and superintendent. For many years, school reform focused on the school as the unit of change. Now increasingly the role of the district as a unit of change, as the impetus for initiating and implementing reforms intended to improve student performance, is gaining prominence. Recent research by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (2004) validates the role of the district as a compelling variable in instituting reform.

Student performance reduced to its basic element is a function of the teacher/student relationship and interaction. It is entirely possible to observe excellent instruction within a poor school through the efforts of an exceptional teacher. It is possible to have an outstanding school within a mediocre district. However, if student success is to be equitable, the entire system must choose equity as a primary focus. The equity mission is a district mission, not the province of a school in isolation. A crude but a more honest and personal assessment of student performance and equity within a district is for employees to answer the question "would I put my own child in any school and classroom in the district?"

If the pursuit of an equity agenda does not permeate the culture of a district, then it is not likely that it will become the focal point of every school within that district. For example, principal support through professional development is one of the primary functions of the district to help principals understand equity issues and the practices to achieve equitable outcomes. If the priority for principal professional development lies elsewhere, then the pursuit of an equity agenda becomes contingent upon an individual principal's own choice, rather than becoming part of the culture of the entire system.

The purpose of this article is not to focus on the district role and how the "equity lens" colors all district functions if equity is the goal. However, we would be remiss in not pointing out that a principal's capacity to lead the equity agenda at a school is compromised without the context of a district focus. In discussing some of the key learnings that follow, issues of equity and race are difficult enough without having to address them in isolation and without district support.

#### *Equitable vs. Equal*

The difference between what is equitable as opposed to what is equal can be beguilingly simple to understand intellectually. However, if the equitable versus equal construct is not internalized, the other concepts to follow will be even more difficult to embrace. For example, if a district is planning to modernize facilities, most people can understand the need to spend more resources on some facilities, in order to elevate older

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facilities to a specified standard. Equity requires that more resources be expended on older buildings than newer ones. If the financial resources were distributed equally or evenly, then the gap between an older and newer facility may very well be accentuated, let alone reduced.

But let us take it a bit further and examine other resources. Would principals willingly give up an outstanding staff member to allow that member to move to a school with a greater need? What about placing students of color in classes of the stronger teachers? What about engaging teachers in discussions about focusing more attention on students of color performing below standards? What is our response to staff who say, “we need to focus on all students, not just kids of color,” since we have White students performing below standards as well? Would we turn down a placement request for a teacher by an involved White parent to save that place for children of color whose parents may or may not know who the “stronger” teachers of a school are? These are challenging yet critical components of the equitable vs. equal discussion that experience has shown to be those with which school administrators grapple with on a regular basis.

We can resolve some of the questions intellectually but may have a more difficult time accepting the equity concept at a personal level. Through the lens of White liberalism (Harris, 2001) we might assure ourselves that we understand equitable versus equal while others do not. Yet our acceptance may fade when confronted with a personal choice. Some White educators react with almost derision towards White parents seeking the “best” teachers and “best” schools, yet they themselves want the same for their children and actively seek it out. After all, we say that our first obligation is towards our own children. In the *Emperor of Ocean Park* (2002), the protagonist, an African American law professor, wonders how many White liberals would be opposed to vouchers if they had to send their own children to the run-down school he happened to be walking by. This is by no means an espousal of vouchers or other false reforms, but only an illustration that this concept can be more difficult to understand, let alone accept and internalize, when personalized.

### *People of Color Are Always People of Color*

During a professional development session with an African American consultant, she asked us (a group of administrators) to describe her. The description varied from “a well dressed woman”—“a professional”—even a “mature woman.” After a couple of minutes of avoiding the issue, she finally said, “anyone notice that I’m Black?” Of course, we did. We just did not want to acknowledge it and were acting “colorblind.” In a blinding statement of the obvious, a person of color is always a person of color.

For all of the times we as Whites struggled with issues of equity, at the end of the day we can walk away. Our whiteness affords us a type of “invisibility cloak” which allows us to avoid the day-to-day issues of color. This advantage is a form of “White privilege” a term coined by McIntosh (1990). Confronted by bad service, we can ascertain comfortably that the waiter was “rude.” Certainly, the behavior is not ascribed to our whiteness. Whites cannot fully comprehend the experience of a person of color and the day-to-day racism, subtle and overt, which is part of his/her daily norm. Nevertheless, it does not prevent us from attempting to compare a negative experience of a person of color with one of our own. Through conversation with persons of color, such a response is often insulting, negating the effect of being of color 24 hours a day. This, of course, is not to say that Whites do not suffer or have bad days. But when we do, it rarely has anything to do with our color. We can walk away from color, an option not available to people of color. As Gary Howard (1999) writes, “The students also reminded me that...it’s not an option for us to be Black, that’s what we are 24 hours a day...If you wanted to...you can walk away from this thing and never look back.”

Moreover, the concept that whiteness is actually a privilege can be especially difficult for Whites to accept. We are not going to delve into the whiteness as privilege concept here, other than to acknowledge both its validity and the anticipated resistance from Whites when implementing an equity agenda.

*How Is an Understanding That People of Color  
Are Always People of Color Helpful to Principals?*

A White principal who understands the seemingly obvious point that people of color are always people of color has a greater understanding of and appreciation for the perspective a parent of color brings to a conference or meeting. The fact that a parent is of color may have more to do with the interaction and communication than perhaps any other variable. The same can be said of students of color. That a student of color may have more to do with his perception of the world, i.e., his teacher and school experience, in general, than any other variable. Students of color see the world differently. How do we know this? Because people of color tell us.

*Whites Need To Talk with People of Color*

During his *Beyond Diversity* training (Pacific Education Group, 2005), Glenn Singleton, Executive Director of the Pacific Educational Group, assigns participants a homework assignment. He asks White participants to reach out to a person of color and have a conversation on a prompt related to issues of race. Most Whites have never actually

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engaged in a real conversation about race with a person of color. Even with friends of color. Whites may not have been given the gift of heart-to-heart discussions on the impact of being a person of color.

It would behoove us to listen to what adult people of color tell us about their experience because in a way they are also speaking on behalf of the students we serve. A student of color may not be able to articulate the sense of isolation he or she may feel in a classroom. The “articulation” may be in the form of behavior which we consider inappropriate because the student is not able to express feelings verbally, or if the student does, whether anyone will listen and understand. A third grader is not going to say, “I really feel left out because out of all the books available for me to read, there is not one that is about me or contains pictures of people that look like me” or “I feel left out when everyone around me looks different than I do” or “You (teacher) have no idea what it is like to be of color.”

### *People of Color Want the Same Thing*

An African Nationalist parent attending a school’s parent meeting once confided to the group, which included the principal and superintendent: “I worry that because I have an accent they [the school] will think I don’t care about school.” The “parents don’t care” perception is a dangerous one because it paints with a broad brush all perceptions within that context. The result can affect expectations. Expectations affect student performance, and perhaps even more important, a student’s sense of efficacy.

### *Race Matters*

The preceding points out what should be obvious, but is so often challenged...race matters. Richard Farson(1996) in *Management of the Absurd: Paradoxes in Leadership* writes about the “invisible obvious,” a critical variable within an organization that not to acknowledge it affects the functioning of the system.

Race is clearly one of those “invisible obvious” variables. It is all around us in society. President Clinton attempted to engage us in a discussion of race during his administration because he clearly understood that race does matter. School systems are mini reflections of society. Of course, school districts with homogeneous White populations may not see the need to consider why race matters. Districts with more diverse populations that mirror society must face the issue head on. One positive aspect to No Child Left Behind (2001) is the disaggregating of scores and subsequent targets for the various ethnic groups. Some districts may not have the challenge of having to close the achievement gap within a district because of the homogeneity of the demographics.

Many Whites argue that race does not matter, especially when it comes to “closing the achievement gap.” After all, excellent instruction, it is argued, will result in closing the gap. Furthermore, a discussion on race can be seen as divisive. It can be.

Why should race be an issue if we just provide students with a rigorous curriculum and best instructional practices? We certainly cannot close the achievement gap unless the aforementioned instructional components, as well as other contributing factors such as increasing instructional time, are evident. The Bay Area Schools Reform Collaborative recently reported results showing that in schools where race is intentionally addressed, progress towards closing the gap is made (Symonds, 2003).

But over time we learned that just because we decide that race does not matter, it still mattered to the people to whom it matters the most...people of color. In discussions about race, Whites expressed frustration that “It feels as if it’s not okay being White.” Somehow, we Whites can turn the conversation about race into a conversation about us. But it’s there in the literature if we take the time to read Lisa Delpit (1994), Sonia Nieto (1999), Lena Williams (2000, 2002) and countless other authors of color. So much the better if we have the opportunity to engage in courageous conversations about race.

Race matters. It is in addressing race that principals need to be part of a broader district perspective. While some principals acting alone can lead the discussion and focus on the equity agenda in attempting to close the achievement gap, only if confronted as a district-wide focus can the culture change to allow for a true engagement and conversation about the impact of race in closing the achievement gap and achieving a broader sense of equity.

The term “achievement gap” itself acknowledges that race does matter. After all, it is the difference among White, Asian, African-American, and Hispanic that constitutes the “gap.” It is not a gap of astrological signs, but of race. As White administrators, we may struggle with the notion of how to lead an equity agenda. But we must not delude ourselves that race does not matter. Yes, poverty matters a great deal. It would stretch credulity to suggest that poverty is not a variable in the achievement gap. Language matters as well. Students learning a new language have challenges beyond native speakers when taking a test in the new language.

But race matters as well. Focusing on the achievement gap as a function of test scores allows us to avoid a broader and more pervasive equity agenda, the emotionally charged issue of race.

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### Conclusion

This article focused on suggested key understandings that principals should be minimally exposed to, and ideally have an opportunity to discuss and internalize when addressing equity issues manifested through the achievement gap at a school. The university has a critical role in including equity discussions as part of the routine course of study in preparation for taking a leadership role. The ideas here are presented from a White perspective and intended for White administrators. Administrators of color have their own challenges in addressing equity issues, not the least being perceived as pursuing a personal agenda. As one principal of color stated in conversation, "If I talk about equity among my White colleagues or staff, they are looking at me from the perspective of 'Of course he thinks that way' because I happened to be Hispanic." In a systems perspective, administrators of color do have a critical role in helping to lead the equity agenda, but the ideas mentioned in this article do not apply in the same way.

In an increasingly diversifying school community, principals are asked to lead from a variety of perspectives. We ask principals to be instructional leaders, community involvement specialists, problem solvers, leadership change agents, communicators, public relation specialists...the list goes on. Leading an equity agenda to help close the achievement gap is one of the more challenging expectations for a principal. We are suggesting here that they should not have to do it by themselves, but within the district as a system.

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