Social justice in schools requires difficult conversations and clear vision

I thought I understood the term "social justice" when we chose it for a *JSD* theme, but I did not fully understand its meaning.

A story from my school board experience illustrates how understanding of this topic evolves. During my school board tenure, state testing assumed new levels of significance. Our state department of education (pre-NCLB) disaggregated student test results by gender, race, free and reduced lunch eligibility, English language learners, and disabilities. The state education agency then announced school rankings determined by a formula that considered test scores across subjects as well as the categories above.

The state was committed to identifying and calling on schools to close achievement gaps. The stakes were high, and, in some cases, just one student failing an exam in one subject could tip the school into the unacceptable category and require the district to take drastic actions to address the results.

During my tenure, we faced this situation twice. Each time we got the news, we discussed how to communicate with the community. While we wanted to say to the majority of parents that their children's education had not been compromised, we knew we sounded like we were blaming the children who had failed.

Instead of recognizing we had failed all the children, we looked for a way to manage the fallout. And each time, there was fallout.

Parents of successful students were frustrated that the outcomes of just a few students could change the entire community's perception of their school's quality.

Parents of failing students were equally frustrated. This was the first time they had objective information that indicated the school had failed their children.

The educators were also frustrated — no one had prepared them to teach all students to higher standards. While they believed all students could learn, they weren't convinced all could achieve at the levels they were being tested.

The process of changing attitudes, developing the skill and will necessary for success, and engendering shared responsibility for all students' success took several years. Fortunately, the district accomplished this goal, but not without a lot of hard conversations.

I now recognize that these educators and parents were confronting their own beliefs about social justice. Ultimately, they had to arrive at a point of view that to achieve real success for all, social justice must be the goal for a school. They became committed to learning and doing whatever it took to help all students achieve. The families, the children, and the educators gained powerful teaching skills and learned incredible life lessons. They learned what it means to work in a school committed to social justice and could see the positive aspects to accountability.

So what does this experience mean for professional development? A commitment to social justice begins with a recognition that injustice has occurred and that we will address that injustice through the vision we create and actions we take to ensure the success of all students.

Social justice is a difficult concept to understand. Too many people want to equate it with cultural diversity training or equal opportunity, and it is so much more. I hope that those who take pride in supporting the learning of other educators will invest time in understanding this important issue. You can begin by engaging others in a conversation about many of the articles in this issue of *JSD*.

The most important role of professional learning is changing knowledge, skills, and beliefs of educators to ensure more students are successful in schools. Ultimately, understanding the concept of social justice at a deeper level will be key to achieving this goal. ■

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