

WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY ‘EQUITY’

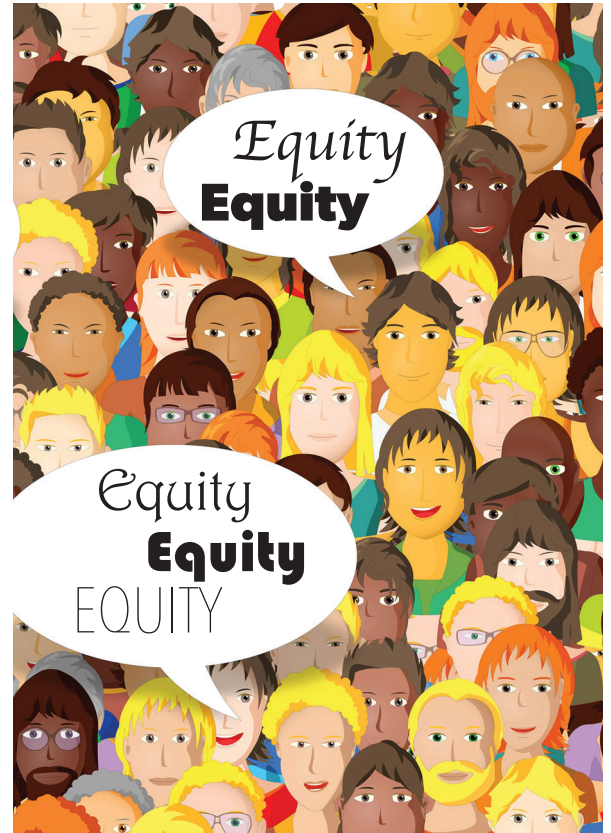
By Eric Celeste

Equity is discussed with such regularity in education that it’s shocking to discover many of us probably aren’t sure how to define the term. To be more specific: When two people talk about equity, it’s very possible they’re assuming agreement but really talking about different things.

That’s my takeaway from a recent survey commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as part of its quest to better understand what other charitable foundations are doing to incorporate equity (Putnam-Walkerly & Russell, 2016). Their findings suggested that:

- Funders are confused by the definition of equity;
- Everyone strongly desired a clear definition of what equity meant to their organization; and
- Groups that had a clear definition of equity — “however unique to that institution” — had more evolved theories of change, frameworks, and plans around equity than foundations that didn’t.

This is understandable, especially in education. Equity can cover so many scenarios and subsets that it can be overwhelming. We’re usually talking about societal inequity and all its categories (race, ethnicity, language, religion, disabilities, etc.). But we can also be talking about inequ-



uity brought about by poverty, cultural differences, social and emotional health, family trauma, and other student-centered concerns. Or the blame for inequity in education can be attributed to organizational faults, be they instructional, programmatic, staffing, or due to other systemic deficiencies.

So before we thin-slice this issue in the stories that follow, it seems important that we talk about what Learning Forward means when we discuss equity and why we think examining equity is crucial to developing high-quality professional learning.

EQUALITY ISN'T EQUITY

First of all, we’re not talking about equality. We’re discussing a cousin of that term: fairness. Equality is one possible outcome of an equitable system, and often it is the primary outcome sought. But there are many equitable processes that lack equality in design or implementation. Because the outcome we’re seeking is one that moves us toward a fair, just educational system — that corrects an imbalance.

What does that mean in terms of professional learning?

Until 2011, Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning included one on equity. (For the reason this was wrapped into the Outcomes standard, read Stephanie Hirsh’s column on p. 68.) The standard called for learning “that improves the learning of all students; prepares educa-

tors to understand and appreciate all students; creates safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and holds high expectations for their academic achievement.”

When revised in 2011, this emphasis was incorporated into the Outcomes standard, which says that professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards (Learning Forward, 2011).

Educator performance and student achievement are key, interdependent aspects of professional learning equity — overcoming challenges that center on the student’s learning experience so she can achieve her fullest potential and addressing elements of the education system that we can control. This fits neatly with what we believe constitutes equity in teacher development: All students have a right and a need to be exposed to excellent teaching. This is dependent on ensuring that all teachers have access to high-quality professional learning.

HOW THIS LOOKS IN PRACTICE

Michelle Kinder knows what this looks like in practice. Kinder, principal at Momentous Institute in Dallas, oversees a pre-K to 5th grade nationally acclaimed lab school that grew out of the organization’s umbrella therapeutic and education service provider for impoverished kids. As such, social-emotional health and equity is baked into its DNA systemwide.

Kinder says that worrying about equity is a constant, in both the mental health and education aspects of the institute. Example: Just as too many high-needs students in urban areas are put in front of the newest, least-equipped teachers, so, too, do many community mental health centers pair out-of-school hires with their highest-need, most-complex-trauma patients.

“To combat this in both our therapeutic and education areas, one of our strategies is robust learning,” Kinder says. “We want our staff to be highly trained, be involved in research, and have our best people be involved in service to those who need it most.”

At Kinder’s school, that means creating an environment where adults feel like professionals, which means taking their development and learning seriously. “If you don’t, they don’t have the willingness to tackle tough, tough stuff,” she says. “That approach is tough to nurture unless they feel that you take their approach seriously.”

Again, this approach is baked in. Students are dismissed two hours early every Wednesday so that everyone can devote three hours to professional learning. This is not directionless learning. Themes are selected for the year to work on as a group, and given the student population at Momentous — 86% free or reduced-price lunch, 39%

English language learners — they always have an equity component. “This sends a message that this is a learning field, and that our goal is closing gaps created by their circumstances,” Kinder says.

DISTRICT CHALLENGES

Momentous is testing its professional learning-based equity mental-health approach with larger systems. For example, the institute is now in its second year of coaching in Fort Worth (Texas) ISD (86,000 students, 89% nonwhite, 77% economically disadvantaged).

“In larger districts, the biggest challenge in creating an equity-focused professional learning environment is the culture piece,” Kinder says. “Asking, ‘Has the school cracked the code on creating a sense of pride, professionalism, etc.’ sufficient to tackle the difficult challenges of equity. When you look at motivation research, that has to be in place so the teachers can step into greatness — which the high-needs kids require more than anyone.”

Another key: understanding that adult learning, especially around issues of race and poverty, is no less fraught with fears than is student learning. Kinder found that when her coaches worked with Fort Worth teachers to explore their own bias challenges — and connect them to student learning — student achievement improved.

Kinder notes it’s very different saying to someone who has just confessed his or her culture-barrier challenges with students, “You’re in a flooded place. Let’s talk about what’s going on in your life.” She said results improved when they said, “You’re in a flooded place. Let’s see how that shows up in the classroom.”

This approach aligns with what Learning Forward believes is the appropriate, outcomes-based focus of equity within professional learning. It’s a process of trying to make sure teachers have access to excellent continuous learning and that all students benefit from first-rate teaching as a result.

REFERENCES

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Putnam-Walkerly, K. & Russell, E. (2016, September.) *The road to achieving equity: Findings and lessons from a field scan of foundations that are embracing equity as a primary focus*. Westlake, OH: Putnam Consulting Group. Available at http://putnam-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/Equity-Field-Scan_Layout_FINAL.pdf.

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