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Tap into educators' sense of purpose to create equitable classrooms and schools

Most professional development in diversity focuses on two aspects: recognizing issues of inequity and building cultural knowledge. While these are important and necessary steps in developing cultural proficiency, they are not enough. In order to address systemic inequities and create culturally responsive classrooms and schools, educators must take action to transform policy and practice.

Sometimes the action is simple, such as providing parents with documents in their native language rather than assuming they understand communication in English. Another relatively easy strategy is to broaden students' perspectives by helping them learn about cultures other than their own. Educators tend to be willing to take actions such as these because they are familiar practices and most people will agree they are necessary and reasonable in today's diverse schools.

However, when the required action goes against accepted school norms, educators are less likely to act. Educators know that acting

against accepted practices disrupts the school climate and makes people uncomfortable. Colleagues and supervisors may question the motives of educators who raise equity issues or suggest changes. The educator may be viewed as a troublemaker. Because of this, educators are often reluctant to act, even when they believe it is the right thing to do. Taking action that is necessary but unpopular requires a level of courage and moral conviction that may not come naturally. Professional developers can help educators develop the courage to go beyond recognizing issues of inequity to taking action to address them.

SENSE OF PURPOSE

Moving educators to action begins with tapping into educators' sense of purpose and commitment to educating all students well. While we would be the first to say schools have a lot of work to do to become equitable, we would also say that the inequities we find in schools have little to do with educators' lack of concern about students being educated well. In

fact, we believe most educators have a deep desire to ensure all students have a chance to succeed. Professional developers can tap into educators' sense of purpose about their work to help them understand they have the responsibility and the capacity to help create equitable classrooms and schools.

Responsibility comes from professional ethics that call for educators to uphold the right of every student to have equal educational opportunity (NEA, 2012). What this ethical obligation means is that once an educator becomes aware that a student or a group of students

may not have the same education opportunity as other students, the educator has a professional responsibility to do something to protect those students' rights. Educators may assume this responsibility belongs only to principals and other administrators, but that is not the case. Every educator has this responsibility. Professional developers can make this responsibility clear by giving educators scenarios that depict common equity dilemmas educators face. Working through scenarios and discussing possible outcomes help educators understand why action is important and what the consequences of inaction may be. Doing so allows



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educators to consider their own position and what they might do in a similar case.

INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS

The next step in helping educators develop the courage to act is understanding that taking action does not require having authority or even having a group of like-minded colleagues. An individual teacher has the capacity to take action that will make a difference. Teachers can create change by working within their own classrooms to develop culturally responsive practices that serve as models for other teachers. They can ask questions about practices that seem inequitable. They can engage other teachers in conversation about culturally responsive teaching and learning. They can organize a book study to help teachers understand what it means to create culturally responsive classrooms and schools. They can host parent meetings to better inform parents about educational programs and opportunities. They can volunteer for committees and serve as a set of eyes with an equity lens. There are many ways individual teachers can make a difference. They do not have to start with a schoolwide effort. In fact, we would discourage that. The place to start is with what is most familiar and over which the educator has the most control.

NETWORKS

As educators take small action steps, their senses of purpose and needs for change tend to grow. They begin to talk with others about what they are seeing and strategies they have tried. Through these conversations, educators develop networks of people who are also interested in creating culturally responsive classrooms and schools. These networks may be internal or external to the school. In either case, the network becomes a tool that encourages the educator to expand

change efforts. One of the strongest inhibitors to action is the fear of being the only one. Networks help educators overcome this fear by assuring them that they are not alone. There are others who are also taking action.

Networks also act as a mechanism for bringing more people into the change effort. As people within the network discuss their efforts, other educators become aware of the need for change. In turn, the network helps these educators understand the responsibility that comes with knowing and provides a forum for helping educators take action. Networks also make it more difficult for educators to choose not to act. It is more difficult to sit on the sidelines when others around you are taking action and there are witnesses to your inaction.

POLITICAL SAVVY

The final step in helping educators develop the courage to act is to make educators politically aware. Once educators develop the courage to act, they often want to act with a sense of urgency and initiate large-scale change. However, this approach is likely to backfire because it does not take into account what is at stake when inequitable policies and practices are changed. Changing policy and practice to be more culturally responsive means changing the way things have always been done. In most schools, the way things have always been benefits some students and families at the expense of others. However, those who benefit from inequitable policies and practices often do not see it this way. They may view longstanding policies and practices as fair and impartial. They may not understand why a change is needed at all and may resist change efforts. Situations such as this can become highly political and volatile. Professional developers must help educators understand how to be politically savvy and to be strategic in taking action. Being strategic means

starting small, building strong networks and seeking incremental change rather than quick, sweeping change.

AN INDIVIDUAL DECISION

Working through this process increases the likelihood an educator will act when faced with an equity dilemma. In the end, the decision to act is an individual one. At some point, every educator will be confronted with a situation in which he or she must choose whether to speak up in support of a student, parent, or co-worker. The educator may not be surrounded by like-minded individuals and may have to act alone. Here's an example: A student who acts out in other classrooms but does well in one teacher's classroom is being recommended for suspension due to behavior problems. Does that teacher speak out in defense of this student, who is good when he is actively engaged? Or does she remain silent for fear of offending her peers by suggesting that perhaps the problem is lack of engaging instruction? Without the courage to act, the teacher might quietly sit by and allow inequity to continue, convincing herself that his behavior in her class is an anomaly. But a teacher who has developed the courage to act knows she has an ethical obligation to act, and she knows there are consequences for not acting. She also knows that taking action is within her control. She has the efficacy to make a difference. Knowing you have both the responsibility and the ability to act is at the heart of having courage.

REFERENCE

National Education Association. (2012). Code of ethics of the education profession. *National Education Association Handbook*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at www.nea.org/home/19322.htm. ■