



CALL TO ACTION

Denise Glyn Borders

WE CAN STRUCTURE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO FIGHT RACISM

TELL YOUR DISTRICT'S STORY

Learning Forward is gathering information from districts on how you're addressing inequity at every level. Email me at denise.borders@learningforward.org to let me know about your successes, your challenges, and your questions.

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From their earliest days in schooling, Black students' experiences in schools are dramatically different from those of white students. For example, Black preschool children are 3.6 times as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions as white preschool children (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The disciplinary disparities continue in K-12: 6% of all K-12 students received one or more suspensions, but look at the breakdown: 18% for Black boys, 10% for Black girls, 5% for white boys, and 2% for white girls (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Inequities for Black students extend well beyond discipline. Black students' access to advanced coursework, for example, is disproportionately lower than their white peers, beginning at an early age and continuing through high school (The Education Trust, 2020).

I don't accept that these disparities reflect intellectual or behavioral differences connected to students' race. They reflect differences in how we as a society approach the overall care of students of color from the time they are born, encompassing health care, socioeconomic conditions, education, and societal expectations of their potential.

There are countless examples of racial inequities in schools that paint a larger picture of entrenched structural racism affecting children of color. Such structural factors include how schools are funded, how — and which — educators are hired, leadership development and pipelines, biases in education research, and the quality and content of curriculum and instructional materials in schools.

Look into any facet of society in the U.S. and there are parallels, from health care to employment and labor practices to housing to policing and incarceration practices. Right now in the U.S., the numbers in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths within communities of color are shockingly disproportionate, yet aligned to trends that disadvantage Black and brown lives throughout society.

While the structural and operational inequities that pulse through schools are built into our education systems, they can be overturned. Learning Forward believes that professional learning, created with intention around standards defining high-quality and demanding equity, is one essential lever to dismantle entrenched biases in schools and districts.

The work to tear down centuries of racist policies, practices, and beliefs is certainly not simple, as we see in the nationwide debates about reforming policing at the heart of current protests across the country.

However, I firmly believe that embracing the following first actions will advance our journey to create equitable teaching and learning in schools.

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STEPS?

While an entire professional learning system will ideally focus intently on ensuring all



students have access to excellent learning, I'd suggest that education leaders emphasize these steps to start.

Assess culture and vision. Very likely, most districts already have a vision statement that shares educators' best intentions to teach all students. But when educators in your district dig deep into each aspect of that vision, do they share definitions of key words like "all" or "each" student? Can they articulate what the implications are for reaching "each" student?

Does the culture in your district and in each school building create space for difficult conversations that address implicit bias, white privilege, and the need to address beliefs along with instructional practices and aspirations for students? Are your leaders committed and knowledgeable champions for equity?

Embrace all forms of data.

Understanding deeply what students' experiences are, based on any aspect of their identity, is essential to building more equitable practices, classrooms, and systems. Read more reports or studies like those cited here.

More importantly, understand data in your own context at the system level and also the classroom level. What do the Black students experience in your schools? How have trends changed over time, and what led to changes? Use data to identify priorities to address, and help your peers and teams use data in ways that move them rather than stymie them.

Prioritize what matters now. As the last several months demonstrate, school systems in general were not prepared to transition rapidly to an all-virtual teaching and learning environment. As we enter a new school

year, prioritize the professional learning that will best empower educators to accelerate student learning in changing circumstances.

For teachers and coaches, this means ensuring they have the resources, technology tools, and learning to effectively teach online. And learning can't stop with technology training. Instructional, engagement, and social-emotional strategies are more important than ever.

Significant numbers of students — sometimes up to 20% of the student body — never logged in to their schools' remote learning platforms this spring, for example (Toness, 2020). This often means leaders need to serve as community advocates to connect with families and support a range of needs, including facilitating access to broadband and technology tools.

At the same time, educators' need for professional learning in the content areas remains crucial. With learning loss as a real concern, aligned priorities around literacy, mathematics, and science will rise to the top.

Identify the expertise required to change. While your leaders and culture may be ready for change today, it's also possible you'll need to locate additional expertise to overturn long-held beliefs and build new practices. This transformation requires sustained effort, effort that must be aligned with other learning in your district. As you identify expertise, focus on knowledge, skills, and dispositions and think long-term.

Track progress. As you set and clarify your vision, concrete goals will help you monitor progress along the way. From the very beginning, create a plan to measure your impact. What will progress look like? What are

short- and long-term indicators that systemic barriers are crumbling and that practices at the individual, team, school, and district level are shifting?

Are you using myriad methods of formative assessment to know if students are benefiting from the shifts educators are undertaking? Consider how you'll document and discuss progress, celebrating wins and adjusting your course of action when necessary.

I'm confident that educators have tremendous commitment and will to transform what all students experience in schools. Let's give them every tool to tackle the inequities they see and sustain the support they deserve to serve all students.

REFERENCES

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