

Virtual networks follow paths to equity

BY MARY ANTÓN, LEE TEITEL, AND TAMISHA WILLIAMS

In the chaos and upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been hard to keep a focus on race and equity in schools. And yet in this time of disruption of our very notion of what it means to be a teacher and how we do school, we recognize that keeping race and equity at the center of our work is essential. In this time of exhaustion and uncertainty, we find great hope for a future beyond the pandemic that is not a return to the status quo.

Our hope is rooted in the power of what the collective can do and in the roles we see virtual networks play in promoting that power. Virtual networks can inform and connect; they can nurture and disrupt. We need these actions to move forward individually and systemically to create a more equitable world.

Networks are powerful real-world examples of the value of collectivism at work. Networks bring together people across geography, ability, and types of institutions. They harness the collective knowledge and wisdom of an array of experienced practitioners, experts, individuals, and teams. Individuals benefit from the experience

of the whole, and the whole grows stronger through collaboration. Out of individualism and isolation, collectives have been forming in ways that were rarely possible when educators were bounded by time and geographic space.

For educators of color, the opportunity to lean into affinity and multiracial spaces to collectively work toward dismantling racism has led to collective healing. For white educators, these networks offer a space in which they can be challenged and learn from collective wisdom without overburdening the often-limited number of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) colleagues in their settings.

This shift from embracing norms of individualism (“I can figure this out myself”) to collectivism (“We are in this together, and together we are stronger”) represents a profound philosophical shift and is a shift to cultural ways of being often associated with Black and Brown communities throughout the world.

UNDERSTANDING THE PANDEMIC VIRTUAL SPACE

As national and world attention focused on acknowledging racial disparities in spring 2020, experts

and institutions stepped up to answer the knowledge void. Experts offered free webinars, lectures, and protocols. Access to people outside of one’s own geography and network exploded. Zoom became as normal as texting.

Educators throughout the summer sought opportunities to step up and do their part. Offered at low or no cost throughout the summer, Black authors and experts shared wisdom not readily available before. For educators seeking to address racial inequity, virtual technology created the feel of a kid in a virtual candy store. Not only did we have this array of choices, but in the virtual world, we could sign up for everything and learn on our own schedule. Even as this virtual candy store supported learning through access to powerful speakers and fresh, engaging content, it could prove overwhelming to sort through the wealth of options.

VIRTUAL NETWORKS VARY

Thinking about the work that we have done in 2020, we recognize that we have embraced the power of collectivism to help us to “dismantle the master’s house” (Lord, 2018). Our

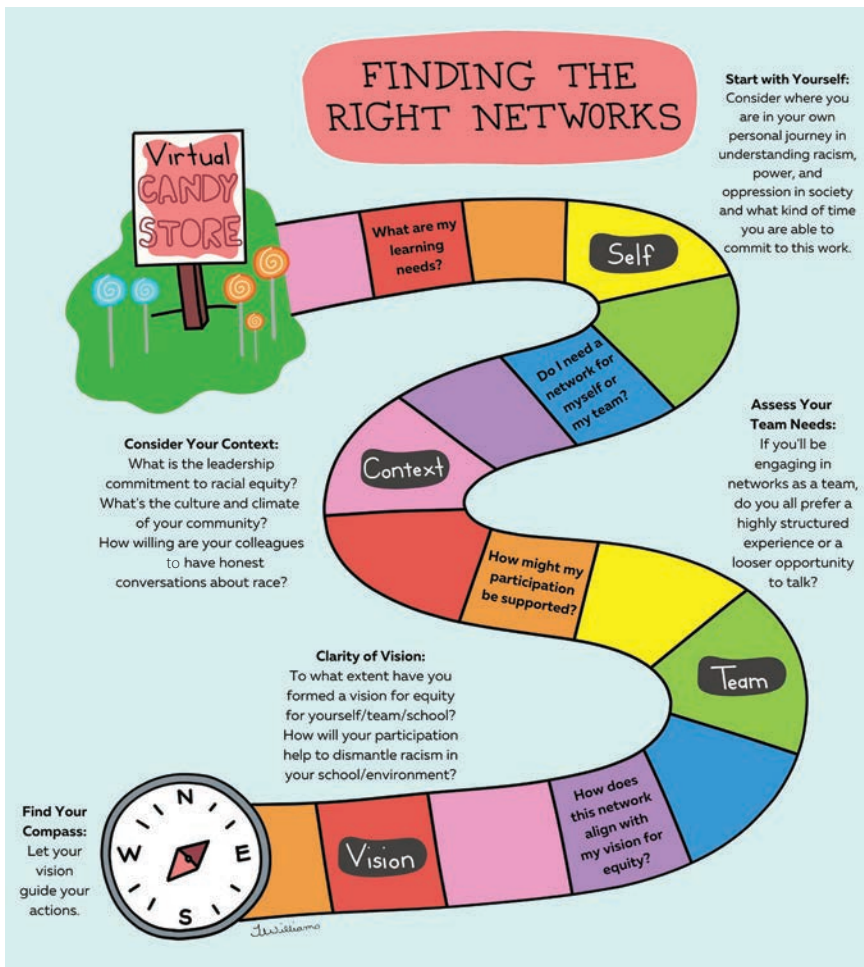


Illustration by TAMISHA WILLIAMS

THE RIGHT MOVES TOWARD EQUITY

Our ability to come together in community during the pandemic provides perspective and strength we did not have before.

experiences participating in, organizing, and learning from virtual networks suggest that networks can vary on a set of dimensions — not binary, but as points on a continuum. Matching them to what we need as individuals, schools, or districts can be helpful. What follows are ways to organize the different shelves in the virtual candy store.

NETWORK EXAMPLES FROM OUR COLLECTIVE PRACTICE

Through our practices, we have facilitated a variety of networks and

offer these examples as ways to deepen your thinking about their similarities and uses.

Informal network:

CROSS-COUNTRY LEADERS

Mary Antón started Cross-Country Leaders in March 2020 as California shut down. This biweekly network provided a space for leaders to share, support, and hold each other accountable to continue their commitment to racial equity. Members invited colleagues to join, formed their

DIMENSIONS OF NETWORKS

- **Time:** One-shots, limited runs (three to four sessions for a continuing group or on a topic), or ongoing.
- **Membership:** Open, drop-in membership; closed membership, but not everyone attends each time; or fixed membership with expectation that all attend.
- **Participation:** Individuals, members of a team (e.g. from a school or district), or both.
- **Structure:** Unfacilitated or lightly to tightly facilitated.
- **Expertise:** Knowledge lies with the experts, with participants, or both.
- **Expense:** Free to paid services and sometimes mixed (voluntary donations).

TYPES OF NETWORKS

The dimensions above can be combined and organized into four types of networks.

- **Prenetwork:** The webinar or the noninteractive informational presentation, often by extremely knowledgeable people in the field.
- **Informal network:** Often job-alike or affinity spaces, places in which educators with exposure to concepts or who identify as a member of a particular group come together on a regular basis to discuss common issues, concerns, and questions.
- **Semistructured network:** Topical networks around identified and established topics over a set of sessions, usually with a consistent membership, often with a facilitator.
- **Structured network:** Includes access to expertise, communities of practice, coaching, and other forms of networked accountable learning designed to help schools and teams reach personal or systemic goals.

own networks, and leaders embraced the realization that district decisions sometimes continued to perpetuate the marginalization of communities of color.

This network offered ways to think together with others in shared spaces by centering conversation around questions such as: How do we create belongingness when all certainty is gone? How can we advocate for our staff and students of color? How do we ensure race is centered in each decision we make? Of critical importance in these was a central theme: Who is thriving in the midst of this upheaval? How can we learn both from their thriving and from uncovering our biases and assumptions about who needs help?

Semistructured network:
A SUMMER WORKBOOK
FOR EDUCATORS

Tamisha Williams designed the WORKbook (gumroad.com//educatorWORKbook) for staff at one school, then broadened it to share across schools and systems. This guide consolidates resources, provides guidance, and points to ways that educators can dig into the underpinnings of racial inequities in the country and schools.

Williams set up a series of four companion meet-ups — virtual professional learning communities — for educators to work through and discuss the content of the WORKbook, in both full group and racial affinity spaces. Group interaction and dialogue drive the learning.

Semistructured network:
SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT
SUPERINTENDENT NETWORK:
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL WORK
ON RACE, RACISM AND EQUITY

When a white superintendent doing equity improvement cycle work in her district with Lee Teitel found that she lacked the breadth of knowledge and the language around equity to frame her leadership moves, she suspected her fellow superintendents in the region felt the same. She and Teitel co-designed



TAMISHA WILLIAMS

VIRTUAL NETWORKS VARY

There are many ways to organize the shelves in the virtual candy store.



TAMISHA WILLIAMS

BE IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

The work to advance racial equity is a marathon, not a sprint.

a monthly network that addresses how these white superintendents, most of whom grew up in the white communities they serve, can support each other personally, professionally, and practically to disrupt and address issues of racism and inequity.

Structured network:
RIDES INTENSIVE CLINICS

Before the pandemic, Teitel guided schools and districts through structured, data-driven, race-focused equity improvement cycles, an approach developed with colleagues in Harvard's Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) project. During the pandemic, the tools and approaches remain the same, but the

delivery system changed significantly.

Instead of meeting the needs of six to eight schools a year through a costly on-campus and hybrid institute, RIDES offers a series of free week-long intensive clinics that support over 200 educators in 40 schools. Teitel, Antón, and others on the RIDES team now offer independent networks that use similar approaches but, rather than being place-based, can bring together schools from across the country. Teams learn to work within their schools and districts and collaborate with teams from other settings to build a sense of community, share ideas and tools for racial equity, and deepen accountability.

LESSONS FROM VIRTUAL NETWORKS

Our ability to come together in community provides perspective and strength we did not have before. Here are some of the things the past year has taught us.

Make it fit your time and budget.

Collaboration doesn't have to be expensive, time-consuming, or led by national experts. Networks only cost the time of the convener to set it up. In this time of isolation, our need to connect is palpable.

Diverse viewpoints spur thinking.

We all benefit by focusing beyond a limited sphere of colleagues that we see every day. Learning across schools, districts, and states results in rapid sharing of resources, ideas, and ways to support students and teachers.

Everyone benefits. BIPOC benefit from collaboration and solidarity; white people from opportunities to talk about racism and white privilege without leaning on BIPOC.

It's a safe space for teams.

Teams benefit from joining networks together, honing their shared focus, and being stretched by the experiences of colleagues from other schools and districts. Guided by the belief that deep work on race and equity must take place institutionally, RIDES networks create spaces that teams need to both

deepen their internal work and benefit from the work and insight of others.

Be in it for the long haul. The work to advance racial equity is a marathon, not a sprint. To make consistent and ongoing progress, equity work must be a part of the fabric of our practices, policies, and procedures. Teachers and administrators need to develop skills and trust to talk across racial lines about dismantling privilege and about race and its impact. Collaboration allows us to see the parts of the whole that each is engaged in and imagine a whole that puts all the parts together.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF VIRTUAL NETWORKS

Successfully navigating the virtual candy store requires three things: clarity of focus and a strong internal compass; thoughtful self-assessment of the needs and strengths of the individuals and teams in your setting; and deep understanding of which options might work best for you and when.

There isn't one "right" network. Think about what will be most helpful in your context to support reaching your vision. Amidst the chaos, confusion, and challenges of running schools and districts during the pandemic, leaders are struggling to keep a focus on sustained efforts toward antiracism and equity. Finding, picking, or forming the right network isn't always easy. As you think about your own learning, your context, and your staff's needs, consider your vision and where you are on your journey.

The urgency for centering race is often offset by the challenges of the pandemic. To lean into discomfort and take a marathon view of equity improvement requires that we recognize we are on a recursive cycle of continual improvement.

We are in a time of great opportunity. Whether learning is in person or virtual doesn't have to be the defining factor in our progress. Virtual networks have the potential to provide free or low-cost opportunities to:

- Provide alternatives to counter

the way things have always been done;

- Provide affinity spaces to thrive (BIPOC) or affinity spaces to understand and question (white);
- Support essential content and research that challenge the status quo;
- Provide places for teams to build trust and try on challenging and often context-counter views and ideas; and
- Provide support outside of your institution for engaging in recurring cycles of equity improvement.

The lessons we are learning from educators give us hope. Decisions about the everyday aspects of running school are intertwined with the recognition that race matters and inequities exist. If we continue to hold these up for inspection, we can challenge both individual teacher assumptions and invisible institutional white norms that lift up some and oppress others. In the disruption of schools as we know them, we have an opportunity to dismantle racism as has never been presented before.

REFERENCE

Lord, A. (2018). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* Penguin Classics.

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AUTHOR USES ARTWORK TO FACILITATE DIALOGUE

The art accompanying this article was created by co-author Tamisha Williams. Williams is a facilitator and coach who works with educators on using an equity lens to better serve their communities. She uses art, movement, and storytelling in her facilitation to help educators focus and deepen their learning.

Williams, who has had a lifelong interest in art, began using drawing in her work after attending a conference session about facilitating courageous conversations visually. A director of equity and inclusion at the time, she used what she learned to redesign her faculty meeting facilitation to include space for visual reflection. She taught her colleagues how to use quick drawing methods to process their own thinking and visualize equity concepts in a new way.



Tamisha Williams

Now a facilitator in her own right, Williams says she appreciates the way that drawing taps into a different part of the brain and helps people really see what they're talking about. When she gives people simple drawing tips and asks them to represent their thinking visually, she finds that their drawings provide something to ground their stories and bring up information that they wouldn't have otherwise thought to share.

Williams is quick to point out that drawing and visual storytelling are not just for people who consider themselves artistically talented. "I love this work because I can bring this anywhere and use it with anyone," she says. In fact, she believes one of the benefits is helping people see that "some of the things they thought they could never do can be accessible."