



## EQUITY IN FOCUS

Angela M. Ward

# EQUITY ISN'T JUST A WORD — IT'S AN ACTION

**Educational leaders, specifically professional learning leaders, must all take actions, individually and collectively, to change systems while changing practices.**

**A**s an antiracist educator, I support colleagues in affective learning spaces to engage in critical self-reflection to create schools that are safe and supportive for students, staff, and families regardless of identity. In the past year, I have found myself coaching countless adults to develop their discursive muscle around educational equity during the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial violence, including the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on the educational, mental, physical, and financial health of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

In summer 2020, I was struck by the juxtaposition of countless people and organizations — from community-serving institutions to celebrity athletes to Fortune 500 companies — posting letters of solidarity to denounce police violence while many state and national leaders refused to acknowledge racial violence.

Simultaneously, educators and politicians angrily took sides about what kind of learning approaches would be equitable and effective in a pandemic. Amid this national rhetoric, schools have been tossed around like political footballs.

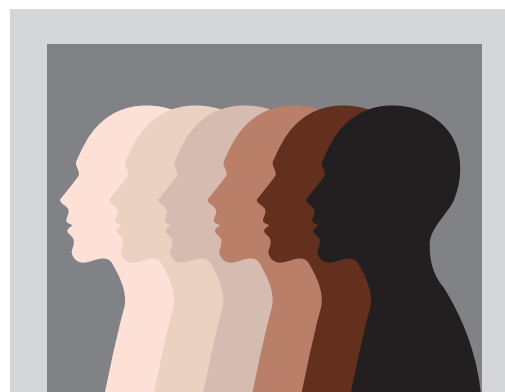
Yet equity is not just a word, it is an action. You cannot do equity through a statement alone. The words have to be tied to concrete events that hold people individually and collectively accountable to an equitable outcome. Without measurable, attainable, and specific goals to hold executive and campus-level leaders accountable, equity postures and policies will not reach the classroom.

As educators, we love our jobs and get to shape the future of our world through the children we serve. What we often miss is our responsibility to critically love the system of education. Because that system has failed to shift through the ages, we cannot take at face value that policy decisions are equitable for all students. Educational leaders, specifically professional learning leaders, must all take actions, individually and collectively, to change systems while changing practices.

I offer that teachers are the main actors in educational systems, and they stand ready to take action, to implement equitable strategies and tools. Teachers possess the praxis necessary to turn education on its head and create the space for all children to succeed. But who will provide teachers with permission to act on oppressive structures and implement more equitable practices? What will it take for teachers to dismantle classroom-level oppression immediately and not wait for approval? Ask yourself: Do teachers really need permission?

I invite you to critically reflect on your role in the system of education. Each role impacts the student and teacher in the classroom. As you engage in reflection, be honest about your

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### LEARN MORE

This continuing column will focus on critical self-reflection and implementing antiracist practices in schools. Learn more in the current issue:

- See p. 64 for tools by Ward on turning equity statements into action.
- Engage with Ward at 1 p.m. Eastern time March 29 for a discussion about her strategies and tools for action. [bit.ly/2NWRxQX](https://bit.ly/2NWRxQX)

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### 3. IDENTIFY PATHWAYS.

We also need to see one or more pathways to the goal we have set so that we have a clear picture of how to reach it. When coaches partner with others to identify strategies for reaching goals, they foster hope. Sometimes this involves asking questions, such as: What advice would you give someone else with your goal? What have you done in the past to successfully meet challenges like this? (Campbell & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018).

When necessary, coaches can suggest strategies teachers might try. However, how they share that knowledge is a complex communication challenge. If they direct teachers or act like know-it-alls, coaches take away ownership of the goal and, ultimately, take away hope.

### 4. TAKE ACTION.

Hope also requires that we believe we can get to our goal by taking the necessary steps along the path. The clearer the path, the more agency and confidence we'll have.

Coaches can make the pathway easier to follow by helping teachers

plan implementation of a strategy, explaining and modeling teaching strategies, and gathering data so that teachers can see their progress. Seeing our progress makes us more likely to believe that achieving the goal is possible.

In most cases, the best way to build momentum and deepen our agency is to take tiny steps forward and see the positive results. Coaches can help in this process by sharing specific, concrete, positive feedback. One true, specific observation delivered at the right time in the right way can stay with a person for a lifetime.

### BE BRAVE

These are tough times, and that makes it all the more important to foster hope in others — and in ourselves. All of the strategies I've shared here can and should be applied by coaches and other professional learning leaders as well as teachers.

It takes bravery to persevere. But when we find the courage to look at reality, set goals, identify pathways, and build agency, we can foster hope. As

educators, we need to feel hope, because there is a lot worth doing.

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### COACHES CORNER

 / Sharron Helmke

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perspective on it. Powerful questions can do this by fostering new insights. Knowing this allows us to support teachers by offering a question, in addition to — or even rather than — an offer of help. Questions like: Who's showing up but not yet mastering the content, and what do their mistakes tell us about their learning needs? What

assumptions are we making about our students, and what choices are we making based on those assumptions? How do we more effectively balance perspectives and voices in our planning meetings so our learning designs are more inclusive?

The challenge and opportunity we're being offered in 2021 is to meet teachers where they are while

supporting their sustained growth. We're being called to be both a supporter and a catalyst for change, to coach for growth *with compassion and situational awareness*. Meeting the need to embody these two roles, often considered opposites, will require we use 2021 to brighten both our coaching instincts and skills. ■

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personal sphere of influence to change the system and dismantle inequitable practices. Actions speak louder than words, so adjust your goals and objectives to hold yourself accountable and do your part to shape the learning environments where students feel safe, welcome, and included.

I hold myself accountable to the students in my care by working from my personal sphere of influence to dismantle inequity in our educational system. In the professional learning I facilitate, I pivot from the traditional approach of scripted lessons and strategies to center personal stories and connections. I invite colleagues to share their experiences and

stories to introduce new perspectives on longstanding issues. They enter these learning sessions often unaware of the ways institutional racism impacts them daily, but they leave with a collective commitment to improve educational practice. ■