



Professional learning and equity directors work hand-in-hand

BY CAITLIN AHERN AND JOHNNY COLE

In the Lexington Public Schools, outside of Boston, Massachusetts, we pride ourselves on being innovative. One of our core values encourages us to “embrace your revolutionary spirit,” harkening back to Lexington’s historic role in the American Revolution.

Two years ago, we demonstrated

that spirit by creating a director of equity role. Positions like this hadn’t previously existed in many districts like ours — small, suburban, well-resourced, high-performing, historically white, and recently diversifying.

We developed the role in part to respond to equity issues that had long existed but were rising in our

community’s awareness, like the trend of educators making disproportionate special education referrals and exclusionary disciplinary practices for Black students. But we also recognized we needed help dismantling the larger systems of oppression that have operated within our public schools for generations.

As important as the director of equity role would be for our district, we knew that the work of antiracism could not rest on the shoulders of one person. Building educators' knowledge and capacity takes broad commitment and partnership from other leaders and departments, especially professional learning.

Fortunately, for many years, the district has embraced a comprehensive professional learning program serving all faculty and staff. Cultural competency and other variations on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics had long been a part of the program, providing a good starting point. The director of professional learning was well positioned to engage in a partnership with the newly hired director of equity to co-develop a program that supported teachers, administrators, and support staff in becoming culturally responsive, antiracist educators.

While the partnership is relatively new, we have learned so much in a short period of time. In this article, we will share how we have learned to establish shared responsibility, differentiate learning to serve everyone, break down barriers between departments, and embed equity in everything we do.

Of course, these efforts are very much a work in progress — we have significant work still to do. Too many students are still being disadvantaged by our policies, practices, and procedures, and, at times, it can be overwhelming to fathom the amount of systemic change needed in a field where, historically, change comes too slowly, if at all. However, we have found that we can build educators' capacity to achieve equity through professional learning, and that strong, agile partnerships are critical to that work.

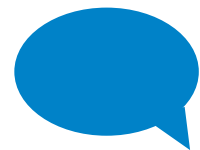
ESTABLISH SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

One important understanding we established early in our partnership is that the director of equity is not the facilitator of all diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning. This was something we addressed in our first meeting together as we worked to delineate how our two roles would complement each other.

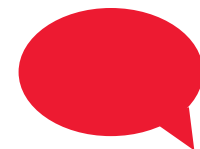
Caitlin Ahern: "As the director of professional learning, I had worked hard to increase the amount and types of diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning we offered and was nervous I was going to be expected to hand that entire part of my job over to this new role. I knew my colleague, Johnny, was coming in with a wealth of experience leading diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning for districts throughout the region, and it made sense to me he would want to continue that work."

Johnny Cole: "As the director of equity and student supports, I knew right away this role was growing quickly, and I couldn't commit to leading all of our professional learning while simultaneously tackling the practices producing disparate outcomes in discipline, hiring, grading, and more. Furthermore, it wasn't my role to be the only expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion; I should be helping the entire district build capacity in leading the work."

Another early decision was that the director of equity would be a member of the professional learning committee, a districtwide, diverse team of educators and administrators who advise on the professional learning program. We collaborate constantly on ideas and visions for our diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning, and the work of facilitating our many



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diversity, equity, and inclusion offerings is distributed among a combination of external providers, building and district leaders, and, increasingly, educators who have taken on informal leadership roles in this area.

DIFFERENTIATE LEARNING TO REACH EVERYONE

Diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning cannot be one size fits all, and it cannot be a one-and-done event. If we simply offered a course in cultural competency here and a workshop in responding to microaggressions there, we would do little to make real, systemic progress toward equity. One of the most meaningful aspects of a coordinated approach is differentiation.

We have learned the importance of differentiating based on identity. Too often, professional learning focuses on socially dominant groups; for example, racial equity work is often centered on white educators and work about gender identity is often centered on cisgender staff. In Lexington, we’re working to provide differentiated full-group learning experiences, as well as focused opportunities for affinity groups organized by shared racial identity.

In department or faculty meetings, we encourage leaders to preview content that will focus on issues of identity such as race and provide voluntary affinity spaces for folks who identify with historically marginalized and silenced groups. This is coupled with targeted professional learning for those same marginalized groups, such as a course in leadership and a summer book study, both reserved for educators of color.

Since well-meaning educators can cause trauma for colleagues with uninformed ideas and opinions, leaders need to be strategic about when to provide these affinity spaces for learning and when to bring their community together for heterogeneous learning.

Cole: “As an educator of color myself, I’ve always been acutely aware of the way white folks have typically been socialized to ignore their racial identity and are often entering professional learning experiences focused on racial equity in a nascent state. While this entry point makes sense for folks just awakening to their journey moving toward social justice, this ignores the needs of many staff of color, most of whom are fully aware of the ways in which racial oppression

WHAT IS AN AFFINITY GROUP?

Affinity groups are spaces where individuals who share a common identity can come together for collaboration and support. They are usually organized on the basis of unchangeable aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexuality, language, ability status, family structure, etc. Affinity groups are most often useful for people whose identities have been historically silenced or marginalized, as oppression can result in feelings of isolation in typical workplace and educational environments.

School-based affinity groups are often designated as safe spaces for participants to share how their identity impacts their role in the educational setting, as well as to work toward a common mission or goal connected to that identity. The absence of individuals who identify differently is often what creates this sense of safety for group members.

has manifested at the micro and macro levels in schools. Worst of all, this continues to marginalize an already marginalized demographic in our schools.”

In addition to providing differentiated approaches to professional learning based on identity traits, we are working to build layers to reflect the different levels of experience our faculty and staff bring to the work. A systemic commitment to equity means supporting learning at all levels and roles of the system and for people at all places on the continuum of racial awareness.

There are many in our district who are striving toward the goal of being an antiracist educator, staff who have taken advantage of every professional learning opportunity we have offered over the last several years. To keep everyone learning and moving forward, we have expanded our offerings to include more advanced courses, as well as helping support pathways to leadership through school-based equity teams and by recruiting facilitators from this group for districtwide workshops and book clubs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some of our staff are reluctant learners — just as with

any professional learning initiative. They might not agree we should be focusing our attention on issues of equity, or they believe this is simply the latest administrative fad. For these educators, mandatory professional learning opportunities must be coupled with consistent messaging and actions from leadership.

We have created districtwide professional learning on diversity, equity, and inclusion that all faculty and staff have participated in, and each school in the district has done diversity, equity, and inclusion work with their own staff. Additionally, in a recent contract negotiation, we were able to add a mandatory course into the educator induction program.

We are also working hard to ensure our supervisors reflect on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Evaluators — right up to and including the superintendent and school committee — should be comfortable asking those they supervise, “What are you doing that is antiracist?” If the answer is “I don’t know,” those supervisors should be prepared to support them, and we should be prepared to provide targeted professional learning so that the answer is different the next time.

To do this, we’ve provided focused learning for administrators. They must lead by example, and sometimes that means admitting that they are learning, too. Modeling that growth mindset when it comes to our equity work is sometimes the most powerful thing leaders can do to inspire their staff.

All of these strands of professional learning across levels are connected so we are ensuring that every new hire will have a foundational introduction to the work, and all staff, including veteran staff and leaders, are seeing that our focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion is being woven into every part of our professional growth and reflection.

Ahern: “In the ‘good problem to have’ category, we are finding more and more that newer staff are entering the profession more racially literate, likely as cultural proficiency and antiracist work become more commonplace in teacher preparation programs. Some of these educators have been allowed to waive the diversity, equity, and inclusion course requirement in our induction program, though it is a goal of ours in the district to build capacity to move beyond waiving the requirement to approving educators to substitute more advanced courses instead.”

BREAK DOWN BARRIERS BETWEEN DEPARTMENTS

Dismantling the long-existing systems of inequity in our schools requires far more partnerships that go beyond the directors of professional learning and equity. Public schools are often siloed by department, and through that segregation these interlocking systems of oppression thrive. We have to dismantle that segregation. As two department directors, we sustain relationships with every department across the system, always in service of our students.

Cole: “I work closely with my counterparts in other departments, like the director of special education, to identify the root causes of our disproportionate referral rates for Black students and the director of human resources to build hiring processes that are antiracist and lead us to attract and hire more diverse employees.”

Ahern: “By partnering with Johnny and other district leaders, I create professional learning that promotes equity work with other departments. To amplify the work with special education, we offer courses that increase general educators’ capacity for providing differentiated instruction and Tier 1 and 2 supports for all learners. To improve our hiring and retention rates for staff of color, I provide targeted learning opportunities for supervisors and evaluators, as well as the affinity-based professional learning options mentioned previously.”

We’re seeing signs of success from these partnerships. For example, in our first year of implementing new learning opportunities for hiring and recruitment staff, one-third of our new teacher and administrator candidates identified as people of color and/or Hispanic/Latinx. As a next step, we must turn our attention to retention as we grow the diversity in our staff.

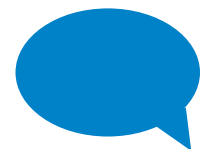
Part of this commitment is creating spaces of support for those staff who come from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups, especially those groups that continue to have limited access to sociopolitical equity in our schools and beyond.

In partnership with the human resources office, we have begun to create some of this support in the form of affinity groups, where staff members who share a common identity can come together for collaboration and support and decide if, when, and how to communicate concerns to ally groups.



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EMBED EQUITY IN EVERYTHING WE DO

It's not enough to have lots of diversity, equity, and inclusion programming for our staff if we don't make a commitment to equity throughout our work. We don't want equity to be something that educators think about at certain times and in certain situations. To address the risk, we are moving toward having topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion be a part of every professional learning course we offer, instead of as a stand-alone category.

We have also broadened our scope to offer these learning opportunities to nonteaching staff. Our schools cannot function and equity cannot thrive without committed administrative assistants, teaching aides, and custodial staff.

These staff have significant interactions with children and families on a daily basis. But traditionally they have not had the chance or expectation to engage in professional learning with our certified teaching staff and administrators.

In our district, we have included them in systemwide learning, and we have offered professional learning tailored to their roles. Although

we often run into logistical hurdles (most often around the fact that teaching staff have paid professional learning time built into the contract, while most support staff do not), we remain committed to ensuring their learning grows alongside those leading classrooms and buildings.

Of course, professional learning alone will not create all the changes we need to make in our schools. Our curriculum, instructional materials, pedagogy, and policies need to be culturally responsive and inclusive. The district is working to make change in these areas, too. For example, our curriculum review process, which includes researching, implementing, and piloting programs over a several-year cycle, now includes an explicit anti-bias approach.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We are still learning and growing, with a lot of work to do and a pace that still feels too slow. But we are seeing signs of progress. Equity teams are sharing work across buildings, small lunch groups and book clubs are coming together across the district, and a growing number of teacher leaders who are committed to cultural proficiency has enabled us to provide

large-scale diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning by facilitating small group debrief sessions.

We are now able to leverage what was previously segmented between buildings and departments into a more coordinated effort across the district.

The arrival of the pandemic, and the subsequent revisioning of teaching and learning over the last year, shifted some of our plans. But we have pushed ahead, knowing this would demonstrate the priority of equity even — and especially — in this unique teaching and learning environment.

With each step that brings us closer to greater equity for all members of our community, we recognize that our approach to professional learning will inevitably shift again. This commitment to continuously adapting our approach will reinforce for everyone in the district that embracing equity is truly lifelong learning.

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