



EQUITY IN FOCUS

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Educators need to commit to creating liberating spaces that recognize the humanity and brilliance of the students in our care.

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WE ARE AT A MAJOR DECISION POINT AS WE REOPEN SCHOOLS

This summer is a time to reimagine and realize a commitment to schools that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive for the identities of each student in our care. As we plan to reopen schools, we must begin with the imperative that students deserve our best, even when we have squeezed out what feels like the very last drop of what we have to give.

Reopening school buildings presents educators with complex considerations. How do we approach physical distancing, mask mandates, worldwide illness, and a global racial reckoning while attending to the social, emotional, cognitive, and mental health needs of students and staff? And how do we do so in ways that are mindful of the trauma experienced?

When schools closed, we had so much unfinished business, especially for black, brown, and indigenous students. Schools had not ensured that adults at every level of the system understand their role to nurture liberating environments for the success and identity safety of all students. For example, schools had not addressed the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals for, nor the underenrollment of, black, brown, and indigenous students in advanced-level courses.

To meet the needs of all students as we reopen schools, educators need to enact a collective disruption of the typical way of schooling and commit to creating liberating spaces that recognize the humanity and brilliance of the students in our care. We have a duty to understand the power and privilege we wield to help or hinder a student's identity development. We have a duty to create spaces that attend to the social, emotional, cognitive, and mental health needs, as well as academic needs, of all students, regardless of race.

We are at a major decision point as we reopen schools — a fork in the road to educating our future. This future depends on students of all races (white, black, brown, indigenous, Asian American Pacific Islander, and other) and backgrounds coexisting in society. One route is backed up for miles with detours of zero tolerance schooling, policing of black and brown bodies, and policies and practices that demand compliance fueling the school to prison pipeline. It focuses on compliance in the hallways, test-taking strategies, acceleration for learning loss, drill-and-kill instruction. That route upholds the status quo and fails black, brown, and indigenous students.



The other route recognizes the mental, social, and emotional health needs of adults and students and creates welcoming school spaces for everyone, spaces that honor students' identities and unique gifts.

The rhetoric in education policy spaces is focused on learning loss. Within that rhetoric exist stereotypical assumptions that low-income students and students of color lack skills. I offer for your consideration that students have also lost the socialization of schooling with their peers, the joy of laughing and joking, the strength of being in community.

For too long, schools have denied these opportunities to students of color, opting for policies to control their bodies and enact a false dichotomy between academic and social emotional skill development.

Continued on p. 14

Continued from p. 12

I implore you: Do not open schools to focus on compliance. Do open schools with an eye toward transformation with smiles on your faces, good mornings and hellos, opportunities for dialogue to build meaning with adults and peers, discipline as a teachable moment centered on co-creating trusting relationships and understanding rather than as a means of punishment. Students deserve to build relationships with adults who prioritize community building and coaching, adults who have their best interests at heart.

This disruption and commitment to creating liberating spaces necessitates a selfless and critically self-reflective approach to working in service of the students in our care. I encourage you to consider the the following part of my

definition of antiracism in education:

Antiracist educators are conscious and aware of their personal bias, their worldview, and how they are privileged or marginalized racially. An educator is antiracist when they actively disrupt systemic racism and inequities from their own sphere of influence and partner with other antiracist educators to enact collective disruption of institutional racism and systemic inequities (Ward, 2020).

It also necessitates a commitment to ongoing learning, to seeing school reopening as an adaptive challenge worthy of a plan-do-study-act approach, in which we continually analyze and reflect on our work and adjust to make improvements. Without this commitment, we risk getting stuck in the hindrances of red tape, powerless task forces, and high-level teams that

meet for months and take no action. This commitment taps the will of educators committed to co-creating liberating schools and workplaces.

Which route will you choose to reopen schools? The predictable zero tolerance, compliance route that leads to status quo and more stress or the transformative route that welcomes students and co-creates supportive, nurturing classroom and school environments? As a mother of black boys, I need you to consider what's at stake — for my children and yours.

REFERENCE

Ward, A.M. (2020, July 11). *Why #AntiRacistEd shouldn't be gentrified: Reason 7: Because whiteness is real.* preview.mailerlite.com/d9g4w6 ■

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Continued from p. 13

was the moment I was confronted by two students who had given essentially the same answer on a test, but the Latino student had received partial credit and the white student full credit. These are just a few of the moments that serve to remind me that I still have work to do within myself.

It's incredibly painful to see myself in the profiles of white privilege and bias in education I read about, but the alternative is to continue perpetuating the kind of damage I firmly believe no child should ever have to suffer — and an alternative none of us should accept. Refusing to look at our own actions and examine our own bias is more than just tacit acceptance. It's active participation.

The good news is this work is fully within our own locus of control. Many of us who want to improve equity for students of color often feel stymied by lack of clarity from leaders and concerned about difficult conversations that potentially could damage relationships. Nevertheless, we can find respite in knowing that personal change

is perhaps the only kind of change we can meaningfully undertake.

As coaches, we can't start by telling others what they're doing wrong or how to "do" equity better. Nor can we support others in understanding their blind spots until we learn to recognize and address our own. Here are some of the ways I continually attempt to gain insight into my blind spots:

- When I feel an urge to act, especially if that urge seems to arise almost automatically, I take a deliberate pause and turn my attention inward, searching for my intention. Often, I find I need to look beyond the first answer to find one that feels wholly honest.
- I pay attention to the spaces I enter, and I notice when I find myself in the minority. How do I feel and respond in such situations? Have I assumed a right to belong, to speak, to know?
- Understanding that how I show up with others directly affects how they respond to me, I ask

myself: In what ways do I show up differently when interacting with people of other races? What feelings accompany those differences in behavior?

- I notice how I approach students of color and respond to their questions and mistakes. Are my expectations for students of color as high as the expectations I hold for other students, and most importantly, do I communicate those expectations through my time, attention, and support to the same extent I do with white students? If not, what excuses do I use to justify the differences, and how do I feel when I'm honest with myself about that?

As you ask yourself these questions, curiosity and honesty will allow you to identify patterns. Only when you're aware of your blind spots and prejudices can you work to change the outcomes that follow from them. ■