

One simple question can accelerate progress toward equity

BY KARIN CHENOWETH



For the past 15 years, I have been traveling to schools and districts that break the correlation between race and poverty on the one hand and academic achievement on the other. That is to say, they serve large percentages of children of color and children who live in poverty and their students score at or above where white, middle-class students do.

These schools and districts hold enormous lessons for any educators willing to seek them out and ask what I call the most powerful question in education: “Your kids are doing better than mine. What are you doing?”

This is the question that acknowledges the hard-won expertise of educators, many of whom are eager to share what they have learned so that others can benefit.

But it is important to understand that educators who ask that question — whether they are teachers, principals, superintendents, or even state commissioners — are benefiting from four things, all important.

A belief that all children can learn, and it is the responsibility of educators to figure out how to teach them. When students don’t do well, it is easy to find reasons to deflect the

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responsibility onto students and their families. “They don’t try hard.” “Their families don’t help them.” “They’re not motivated.” We’ll leave aside the blatantly racist explanations some might use.

Educators in highly effective schools don’t talk in this way. Instead, they say, “What more can we do to engage and motivate our students?” and “If our families are too stressed to provide homework/other help, what can we do to make sure students still get the benefits from homework/other?”

An ability to take a step back to assess results in an objective way.

Education is such a personal field that this is difficult. Educators do what they do because they think they are doing the right thing. To be able to see that the students in another classroom, school, district, or state are doing better than your own requires developing professional distance and judgment and stamping out the natural defensiveness that comes when you are working hard and not getting the results you wanted.

The availability of publicly available, commonly agreed-upon information. At the classroom level, this might mean common formative grade-level assessments that teachers agree on and study together so that a teacher can say, “Hmmm. Only a few of my kids learned to convert fractions to decimals, but most of yours did. What did you do?”

At a school, district, or state level,

the information might consist of state assessment data, attendance data, suspension data, college-going data, or something else. This year, it might be COVID-19 transmission rates. But it is necessary to have commonly understood and public information that allows educators to, as British researcher Mel Ainscow says, expose and share expertise.

It is also necessary to be able to disaggregate the data by student group to look for patterns and address them. This is what it is to be “equity-centered.” If all educators ever do is look at overall numbers, it is easy to miss issues. It might be easy to be complacent, for example, if 80% of students are proficient in a state where 75% are.

But if, when the data is broken apart, it appears that 90% of the girls but only 70% of the boys are proficient — well, there might be an issue with how boys are feeling in the school. And if it is broken down further and it turns out 80% of the Latino boys are proficient but only 60% of the African American boys are, there is another issue to figure out.

And then the investigation can begin. Are there particular teachers whose African American boys are doing better in the school or district? What can be learned from them?

A culture of trust. Too often in the field of education, the admission of failure is seen as a weakness rather than as a strength. If a kindergarten teacher

is going to point out that fewer of her students know their letters and sounds than those of her colleagues, she needs to know that her admission will be met with help, advice, and time to observe other classrooms rather than criticism and shame.

Such a culture of trust is not something that can be cultivated in an institution where everyone is off doing their own thing. It is only possible in an institution — whether it’s a school or district — with common goals and a common way of talking about problems.

Each of the things listed above requires leadership to establish. Leadership to establish common goals, a common language, a culture of trust, and to find and manage time and information so that adults can meet together to expose expertise and visit other classrooms and schools to learn from it. When those things are in place, educators are able to lead enormous improvement.

Take, for example, Roland Smith, the former superintendent/principal of Lane, Oklahoma. He took the job in 2003, and he walked into a mountain of challenges. He was the fourth superintendent that year; the state claimed the district owed it money; the school bus dated from 1976; the parking lot was unpaved; and the electricity powering freezers holding hundreds of chicken parts had gone out a few days before he arrived.

After Smith spent a couple of years solving the obvious physical and financial needs of the district, he began to focus on the academic needs. A small, rural district, Lane had long been low-performing. Smith wanted to change that but wasn't sure how.

He studied the state data and found that Cottonwood, about 25 miles away, was scoring toward the top of the state and had very similar demographics to Lane's. Most of the students come from low-income homes and about 40% are Native American, mostly Choctaw. Smith called Cottonwood's superintendent, John Daniel, and asked him what he was doing to get such high scores.

Smith told me he was initially very skeptical of Cottonwood's success. He said that he challenged Daniel, telling him: "I think your teachers are cooking that test. Show me different." Smith says Daniel didn't get mad or raise his voice. He said to Smith, "Let's go for a walk."

Daniel said he is used to his fellow superintendents thinking that Cottonwood is cheating. His students are not the kind of students superintendents recognize as being high achievers. His response is always to invite them to visit Cottonwood. But those who visit don't always understand what they are seeing. "They roll their eyes a lot," is how Cottonwood's librarian Susan Eddings puts it.

Smith, however, took it all in. "My epiphany was to understand — from John Daniels — the importance of reading," he said.

On that walk, Daniel showed him Cottonwood's program for 3-year-olds, where children were learning nursery rhymes and songs and how to form letter sounds; the program for 4-year-olds, where children were learning to map sounds onto letters; kindergarten, where children were reading nine weeks into the school year; 1st grade, where children were reading stories and writing about them; and 2nd grade, where children wrote about the same topics from both a fiction and nonfiction perspective.

Daniel remembers what Smith said after that walk: "I've been doing it all wrong."

Smith, a former high school science teacher and principal, had not realized how critical the early years of education were and had not understood the importance of evidence-based reading instruction.

"He thought we were babysitters," says Priscilla Jackson, one of Lane's kindergarten teachers.

That visit was the beginning of Lane's improvement. Smith began sending teachers to Cottonwood, and they were able to see why Cottonwood's children recognized more sounds, knew more letters, understood more vocabulary, and had learned more background knowledge.

"They were open to share ideas, to share resources, to say you're doing a good job. They weren't judging," said Sharon Holcomb, assistant superintendent. "Whenever I went with teachers that was what I saw — they were just, 'Come with me and sit down right here and let me show you.'"

Lane applied for a grant and was able to hire a reading consultant to work with the teachers on how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Smith and his teachers met for two hours or more every week to study their internal data to see whose classes were moving ahead and why, systematically exposing and learning from internal expertise and solving problems. And he continued to call on Daniel and send his teachers to learn from Cottonwood's teachers, thus learning from outside expertise. More of Lane's students learned how to read, and Lane's achievement on the state assessments slowly improved.

Years later, when Lane earned an "A" on the Oklahoma State Report Card, Smith told me, he held a party for the whole school in the gym where he played Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors." Children who, Smith said, lived in "abject poverty" were reading and achieving and heading for high school and college.

Saying that we need to expose and learn from expertise isn't a grand scheme of education reform, nor is it a promise of success. We've had plenty of schemes and promises in the last couple of decades, few of which have led to anything more than discouragement.

It is, however, an acknowledgement that there is expertise within the field of education and, if we systematically sought out and learned from that, we might make more progress than any expensive program adoption or "disruptive" organizational scheme.

But to seek out and learn from success we need in place those things listed earlier: professional judgment, publicly available data, and a culture of trust. And — perhaps most importantly — we have to jettison the idea that some kids will learn and some will not. All children are capable of learning, and it is the job of educators to figure out how to ensure they do.

To put those things in place, we need school and district leaders who understand how to structure schools and districts to help establish them.

We have known about the importance of school leadership for many years, ever since Ken Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom published *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* in 2004 and the UChicago Consortium on School Research published *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons From Chicago* in 2010. The evidence just keeps building — Jason Grissom, Anna Egalite, and Constance Lindsay just found, in *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*, that, if anything, the previous research understated the importance of principals on student learning.

Now that we know that the expertise of leaders is important, we need to be able to systematically expose it and learn from it.

To do that, educators need to be able to take a step back from what they

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For example, we can focus on bringing student voice into our assessments. We can ask students, “Does school give you joy? When are you most joyful during the school day? When was math joyful?” But first we have to define joy. It’s not just happiness; it’s a fulfillment of truth and justice and beauty.

We have to do this work now. Our ancestors didn’t just talk about change; they were doers of the word. They didn’t wait. We can’t wait.

This is comprehensive, long-term work. How do you build capacity for it throughout the system?

Start with leadership, especially the superintendent and the school board. How are they recruited and hired — what is required of them? We should require superintendents to teach a culturally responsive lesson plan before being hired. How can you lead in pedagogy if you don’t teach it?

We also have to rethink how superintendents are evaluated. To keep your job, you should have to show evidence of culturally responsive leadership. No one at Apple or Google is going to keep their job if they’re behind the times and they don’t display evidence of advanced technology expertise. But, for some reason, our education leaders can keep their jobs when they are behind the times. I am not saying it is always easy, but it is certainly possible.

Then you do this same work with principals. You change how they are recruited, hired, and evaluated. I also work with leaders on how to make the changes. I teach leaders how to write mission and vision statements and make plans of action to follow through.

This is nothing new, but what’s new about it is that we add things like equity, anti-racism, and culturally and historically responsive education. I teach them how to create and collect benchmarks and assessments of joy, criticality, and identity and to rethink how they assess skills and intellect.

Leaders have to create a culture and an environment for this among all their staff, so I also teach them how to lead and coach teachers, how to run a staff meeting, how to embody it in their speech and day-to-day work. Then we rewrite our documents, like our lesson and template documents. And in doing this, they must center love and joy.

What has the response been like from educators?

There have been three main responses: silence, head nods but no real action, and “we need this and we’re going to do it.” In some places, I am seeing the teachers union take this up and commit to it.

Leadership is a key factor. In districts that are most successful doing this work, superintendents show up to do the work. In one district I worked

with, which had about 40 schools, the superintendent showed up to every session, wrote curriculum with teachers, and created her own observation tool. It works when the leadership creates a tone and then holds others accountable to the expectations.

We all have to hold ourselves to those expectations and work on ourselves. As [education scholar] Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz says, we must engage in the archaeological exploration of self. We have to do that work before we can go further.

What other recommendations do you have for education leaders?

It’s possible to make change right now, tomorrow. The U.S. Department of Education gave a lot of autonomy to states and districts. We must start making policies and adopt a model where teachers can be trained to teach in more responsive ways.

It’s time for us to mandate justice for kids. We need to hold up humanity as much as we lift up the other things we hold valuable. This has been said by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others. It’s not new. But if we listen, if we start to do this more as a nation, we would see positive change for all.

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are doing, cast a gimlet eye on the data, and say, “Your kids are doing better than mine. What are you doing?”

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