



## EQUITY IN FOCUS

Angela M. Ward

# ADDRESSING STUDENTS' HUMANITY IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

**Schools need an equity-focused professional learning plan that will center social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and staff as an essential part of learning.**

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**W**hen the U.S. shut down during spring 2020, my youngest son was in 8th grade. He had no closure to his school year or his middle school career, and then he began high school from home.

This year, he started face to face coursework as a sophomore. My son and students like him lost a lot in that time between the end of 8th grade, when they were just entering their teen years, and 10th grade, when some have grown to their full height and others may be navigating adult responsibilities.

As an educator who centers the comfort of students, I know that some of the most difficult losses for students were the multiple opportunities

in the school day to socialize with their peers, make mistakes and figure things out for themselves without adults hovering, navigate conflicts, and *just be*.

Because of that, we should have all expected the social, emotional, and behavioral struggles that are manifesting right now. We shouldn't be surprised by the surging mental health needs in schools. And we have to hold space for the reality that families, regardless of socioeconomic status, were not all in a space to attend to the social, emotional or mental health needs of their children over the past year and a half.

Yet, despite our students' predictable needs for extra social and emotional support, I see the system course correcting, going back to inequitable business as usual. Leaders are talking about "learning loss," a term similar to "summer slide," both reproducing a decades-old deficit narrative sure to assign historically marginalized students to segregated academic experiences.

When educators use or hear these terms, they are not thinking about straight-A students like my 10th grader, yet they are thinking about students who look like him. And they are, even if subconsciously, erasing their humanity.

Schools need an equity-focused professional learning plan that will center social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and staff as an essential part of learning. It should decenter achievement and test score attainment to focus on educator awareness, empathy, and skill development to acknowledge students as humans harmed by the current state of society and take action to meet their needs. Meeting those needs and addressing students' humanity is an equity issue.

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning can guide this work. A longstanding resource for educators, the standards are currently undergoing revision. The updated version, which is expected to be released in spring 2022, will include three interrelated equity standards that are essential for educator planning, preparation, and developing processes to meet student needs (Brown & Crow, 2021).



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team leaders. Empower team leaders to continue the work and processes you've established with the team and coach into developing their coaching and leadership skills.

**Streamline your coaching.** Create protocols and processes that lead to desired results and can be followed consistently even when you are not present to lead the work. Then trust people to follow them or adapt them as necessary.

**Establish alternative sources of support for teachers, especially less experienced teachers.** It might feel rewarding to be needed by the teachers you support, but there is a hefty price for such gratification. Instead, build a web of support for teachers by connecting them with peers and other support staff with complementary expertise. This has the added benefit of building lasting networks of collegial interactions that benefit students as well as teachers.

**As you juggle your many responsibilities right now, remember that flexibility is a key asset of effective coaches. One of our longstanding commitments is to be role models of how to learn and grow through challenges.**

**Set boundaries for your work and your time.** If you've always been on call for your teachers, now is the time to define the kind of emergency for which a teacher should expect an immediate response from you. Clarify what constitutes a realistic immediate response. Define these for yourself and communicate them to teachers, and then consistently adhere to them. Changing habits (yours and others') takes time, but you've spent time helping teachers

become more intentional and reflective about their practice. Now you have an opportunity to give them space to practice that learning in a more independent way.

As you juggle your many responsibilities right now, remember that flexibility is a key asset of effective coaches. One of our longstanding commitments is to be role models of how to learn and grow through challenges.

You may secretly find yourself enjoying your new roles and tasks, especially working with students directly again. If so, you might feel a sense of divided loyalty or even guilt about that enjoyment. Don't worry about it. Relax and take it all in. Your heart is big enough to love more than one facet of your work, especially when you aren't overwhelmed and stressed by it all. ■

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**The Equity Practices standard** focuses on pedagogy to honor and address each student's needs. Professional learning that addresses equity practices helps educators focus attention to understanding students' lived experiences to build trusting relationships.

Learning to influence practice should help educators understand that the schools — and students — we left in March 2020 are not the same today. Society changed. People changed. The impacts of race, racism, and the blatant inequity that exists became clearer. Student agency blossomed into a mighty force that has to be reckoned with, not squashed, suppressed, or dehumanized.

**The Equity Drivers standard** focuses the learning designer on inspiring educators' critical self-reflection. Equity-centered professional learning requires a higher level of personal scrutiny than professional learning that is focused on

the delivery of academic content alone.

In my research, I have found that race-centered professional learning is most effective when the facilitators enter with the plan to understand and negotiate the emotional nature of race and understand that the application of learning is a long-term process for the facilitator and the participants (Ward, 2019).

This long-term process requires reflection. When that reflection is combined with academic and social and emotional content, the result is a beautiful combination of learning elements coming together to serve the equity needs of students, families, and staff.

**The Equity Foundations standard** requires the learning designer to base learning on the solid footing of an equitable vision for teaching and learning. Equity is rooted and grounded in the painful recognition that meeting all students' needs is not the current

standard. In fact, when the term "all" is used, it often erases the complexity of existing as a minoritized person in an inherently racist school system.

How will you apply these standards in your equity-centered professional learning this year? Start by designing your personal reflection time to make space for the planning necessary to do this work with attention to the beliefs, practices, and conditions to center students' needs during this stressful time.

**REFERENCES**

**Brown, F. & Crow, T. (2021).** Equity is front and center in revised standards. *The Learning Professional*, 42(3), 8-9.

**Ward, A.M. (2019).** *Researcher as witness: Pedagogical and curricular decision making in race-centered professional learning*. repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/75801 ■