



BY NANCY B. GUTIÉRREZ

**J**ames Lovelace's 8th-grade English classroom was not like the other classes in the middle school where he taught in East San Jose, California.

His students sat in a circle, Socratic seminar style, and discussed poetry. They dissected the lyrics to songs like Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." His students wrote essays about what it meant to be themselves, to be young people of color growing up in a vibrant Latinx community that also faced its share of challenges. They debated issues of family and life choices that came up

when reading *The Pearl* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

As a new teacher, he saw that most of his colleagues had been teaching the same material in the same way for 20-plus years — and many of their students, year after year, were struggling. In department meetings, his colleagues would shoot down his ideas for different ways to engage students, sending him home in tears of frustration. But he kept at it.

Over time, his principal saw the impact he was having on his students and came to his defense, supporting his

ideas at staff meetings and with parents who questioned Lovelace's methods. His students' test scores and overall performance jumped.

One student in particular, whom the other teachers had given up on and labeled a troublemaker, flourished in Lovelace's classroom, finding her voice in class discussions and in the essays Lovelace encouraged her to write.

It was not easy, but Lovelace's determination to be bold, to stay the course of what he knew was right in the face of pushback, had a tremendous impact on every young person who

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set foot in his classroom. I know that because I was that young troublemaker who found her voice that year. It was in his classroom that I learned that it was OK to have different opinions and come together to debate them. He taught me that it was OK to question the world around me. In no uncertain terms, Lovelace changed my life.

Today, as our country reckons with racial injustice amidst an ongoing pandemic, there are Lovelaces at all levels — in classrooms, principal’s offices, and central district offices — asking questions like: Am I being bold enough? Or am I too cautious? Am I putting my job at risk by doing what I believe is right and necessary? What approach is most courageous, sustainable, and strategic for centering my students and families in this moment, when they need me most?

Aiming to create culturally responsive systems, many wonder whether they should be carefully walking a tightrope of competing expectations and beliefs or catapulting themselves from a cannon to call attention to inequity. These questions are only heightened by the intensely politicized climate we live in today.

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to the inclusion of their own child or a distortion of American history.

It takes courage, stamina, and strategy to effectively serve every child in a district. We have all seen leaders risk — and sometimes lose — their jobs and sacrifice their personal well-being to advance collective work. And we all know leaders who practice tempered radicalism, carefully and intentionally managing resistance within their schools, districts, and communities, sometimes achieving great success and sometimes feeling great frustration (Meyerson, 2004). What now? What is the right path forward to achieving equity for all?

I have come to realize that there is no one right path. We need a range of leadership approaches within a system working together to navigate the push and pull and maneuver through the nuance, the politics, and the emotions of working toward equity and culturally responsive education.

At The Leadership Academy, we have seen leaders help move the needle on culturally responsive leadership in different ways — working from within to change a human resources policy that increases the pool of teacher candidates of color or skillfully facilitating public conversations that encourage community stakeholders to share how they experience their schools.

Our efforts to support and develop more than 10,000 education leaders across 37 states over the last 18 years,

from large urban systems to small rural districts, have shown us the impact different approaches can have on young people.

We have also seen that across all leadership types and approaches, there are common threads we must all weave in the service of culturally responsive leadership: deeply understanding the lived experiences of students and staff, and lifting up and embedding those experiences across schools and systems every day.

The Leadership Academy’s Equity Leadership Dispositions offers leaders a road map for strategically developing culturally responsive leadership practices. This set of six dispositions can be organized under three categories: explore mindsets, assess systems, and change conversations.

## **EQUITY LEADERSHIP DISPOSITIONS**

These dispositions and habits can help leaders manage environments rife with issues of distrust, political sensitivities, resistance, conflict, and distress. They can help leaders determine how they will build collective action while remaining keenly aware of shifting authorizing environments like a change in school board membership or increased concern about critical race theory in classrooms that could require changes in leadership approach. They can help leaders determine whether they should be walking a tightrope

or catapulting from a cannon in their efforts to build a more culturally responsive school or system.

### Explore mindsets

Culturally responsive leadership starts with self-reflection. Our personal beliefs and biases — both conscious and unconscious — determine how we see the world, other people, and ourselves; they affect our actions and how the systems we oversee are shaped and function.

If we don't closely examine our own identities and our roles in historically inequitable structures, we as leaders risk perpetuating and reproducing inequities in and outside of our school systems (Jones & Vagle, 2013; Brooks et al., 2007; Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Such critical self-reflection should be an ongoing, lifelong process.

To move culturally responsive work beyond yourself, to move toward making systemic change, it's important to then **model your beliefs**. You can do this by consistently naming equity as a driving force behind your leadership actions and decisions.

When you take a strong and vocal stance, you communicate the public value of equity across all practices and can establish a coherent and common purpose for members of your learning community (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). It's also essential to model vulnerability and emphasize that mistakes will be made when speaking about issues of equity, inclusion, and race. By doing this, you will help others overcome those fears and encourage them to take risks in exploring and sharing their own feelings (Sue et al., 2009).

In New York, NYC Department of Education Senior Deputy Chancellor Marisol Rosales is a role model for this, as she often shares her personal journey as an immigrant student and lifelong multilingual learner. She tells her team, principals, and students about what it was like to arrive in America from Chile at the age of 17 and how that has shaped her perspectives on education and how she leads.

Here are some reflection questions you can use to help you explore mindsets around equity:

- How has race intersected with your leadership journey?
- What is your personal vision and belief system around race and equity?
- How have you benefited from and leveraged your education to get where you are?
- How are your experiences different from or similar to those of the students you serve?
- How do you model vulnerability when talking about issues of equity, inclusion, and race?

### Assess systems

You must understand where a system stands to know where it needs to go. Developing this understanding requires that you and your team ask questions and listen deeply, acting with cultural competence and responsiveness in all interactions, decision-making, and practice. That means gathering feedback from a diverse group of stakeholders — parents, students, staff, alums.

It's critical to partner with traditionally marginalized populations to center their needs and voices and to bring together stakeholders with different perspectives to find shared values and common entry points to the work. The stories community members share are so important for informing your decisions. They can provide legitimacy and support and make explicit the public value of the work.

For example, leaders in Des Moines Public Schools in Iowa held virtual town halls in the midst of the pandemic to ask questions like: What would it look like for students, families, and community to feel like they belong at Des Moines Public Schools? What does respect look like now between staff and students and how do you think it could be better? What about the district curriculum do you think prepares students for life now and after high school? How do you think

the curriculum could better reflect your ethnicity and culture and that of others within the school community? If Des Moines Public Schools wants to be an anti-racist district, what else do they need to be thinking about for the upcoming school year and into the future? District leaders used the feedback to begin making changes to their curriculum and create structures for better supporting school leaders of color.

Consider the following questions as you assess your system and its needs:

- Are the decisions you are making as a leader reflecting the needs and priorities of students and families? If so, how? If not, how do you need to change your decision-making process to better reflect the needs of different stakeholders?
- Ask your students how they feel in their classrooms. Are they engaged in their learning, and if not, why not?
- Do families feel welcome in their schools? Do your staff feel supported? Why or why not?
- In group discussions, are you paying close attention to which voices aren't being heard and inviting them to express their perspectives?

### Change conversations

Equity work is complex, requiring fundamental structural changes and coordinated efforts. Confronting long-standing beliefs and practices requires a collaborative effort, where stakeholders engage in intentional conversations about who benefits from current policy and practice and who is being minoritized or disadvantaged (Klingner et al., 2005).

A key aspect of creating more socially just schools is empowering your team (Theoharris, 2010). You can purposefully build the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school when you designate time and space for staff to examine their personal beliefs and collaborate to

change educational practice (Smith, 2005; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Berg, 2018; Alvarez, 2019). Implement shared decision-making structures and develop a culture of trust and respect.

Consider the work of the St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota several years ago. Under the leadership of then-Superintendent Valeria Silva, the district created a dozen “beacon schools” headed by leaders committed to moving equity work forward. The district equity team supported these schools with coaching, budgeting and operations assistance, and training for teachers and principals. The school leaders from these schools met regularly to share and learn from one another, and slowly they started identifying and changing practices that they realized were hurting kids.

For example, one school had had students with disabilities enter school each day through a back alley because it was the easiest place for the bus to drop them off. The district team asked the school leaders how they thought the students felt using that entrance when their peers arrived through the front door.

The school changed the practice so that those students entered through the main doors. In a short time, students’ self-esteem improved significantly, as they shared in a video they recorded. The beacon schools saw learning improve, discipline incidents drop, and parents participating more in schools.

That is how you can then work as a team to confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations, and ultimately create systems and structures to promote equity with a focus on minoritized populations.

These questions can help you ensure that you do this work in a systemic way:

- How are you establishing clarity and agreement with your team and community on a shared vision and plan of action?
- What are you doing to clearly

define together what success looks like, and how it can be measured and build a community-wide commitment to equity and access?

- How are you ensuring that this work is not seen as an add-on but as a lens through which all decisions will be made?
- Are you creating opportunities for others to lead conversations around equity and receive critical feedback from friends? If so, how, and if not, how can you do that?

### BEING STRATEGIC

Of course, in today’s political climate, living those dispositions in ways that effectively lead to culturally responsive practice requires intentionality and strategy. A tool that has been helpful to me in my personal leadership journey and one that we at The Leadership Academy encourage leaders to lean on during this time is Harvard Kennedy School Professor Mark Moore’s strategic triangle (Moore, 1997).

This framework hinges on what Moore calls “the authorizing environment,” the formal and informal authority required to deliver public value. Whether a school board member, a superintendent, or a principal, culturally responsive leaders need to understand the context within which they are advancing their work to determine the most strategic entry points, road map, and intentional leadership moves. This way, changes are made by, with, and for your community.

Moore argues that within our authorizing environment, we have to simultaneously move three key levers to enact public good:

- Understand the **public value** of the changes you are seeking to make. (*Consider how Lovelace engaged his students in new ways that accelerated their learning.*)
- Identify the **sources of legitimacy and support**

necessary to authorize the organization to take action and provide the resources necessary to sustain the effort to create that value. (*Lovelace’s principal did this when he saw the impact Lovelace’s culturally responsive teaching approach was having on students.*)

- Understand the **operational capabilities** that the organization will need to rely on or develop to deliver the desired results. (*Lovelace engaged in professional learning beyond what the district offered and used his own resources to develop the skills he needed to teach in new ways.*)

For an idea to be worth pursuing in the public sector, it has to be valuable, supportable by those in a position to authorize action and provide resources, and operationally doable.

### MIX OF LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

It takes a system of leaders using a variety of courageous and strategic approaches to bring about large-scale, collective, and sustainable change. Working together, these leaders can ensure that students don’t have to cross their fingers and hope they get a Lovelace because their schools will be full of culturally responsive educators and practices.

We can each do our part to create the conditions to shape this kind of learning experience for every single child. What kind of leader are you? How will you show up for your staff, students, and families? Will you walk a tightrope or catapult from a cannon in service of creating culturally sustainable systems? Whichever is right for you and your community, I urge you to come together with others to push this work forward.

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disengagement. This is one of many reasons our leaders are committed to staying the course.

## MAKING AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Making equity systemic requires an organizational commitment to building a sustainable culture based on mutual intentions and expectations about equity across the entire organization. This work is a journey, and, as leaders, we must respect that journey and ensure that our colleagues and staff understand that this work takes time, effort, and patience.

It's easy for individuals and teams to get off track on that journey unless there is a clear road map for how to achieve equity across many levels of the system. The Delaware Department of Education is taking intentional steps to pave the way. By building a system with shared basic *underlying assumptions* and

commonly accepted *values* that lead to specific, purposeful actions documented through *artifacts*, we're moving toward systemic and sustainable equity.

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**Monica Minor Gant (monica.gant@doe.k12.de.us)** is associate secretary of the Delaware Department of Education's academic support team. ■

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**Nancy B. Gutiérrez (ngutierrez@leadershipacademy.org)** is president and CEO of The Leadership Academy. ■