



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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DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

LEADING AND LEARNING FOR EQUITY IS A COLLECTIVE JOURNEY

I never wanted to be a teacher when I was growing up, let alone a district-level professional learning administrator. I certainly never expected to be writing a column for this magazine about how to support the professional growth of equity-centered school leaders. But I always knew education was central to my path.

As Jordanian immigrants to the United States, my parents ingrained in me the belief that education is a key lever for change and the seed of all opportunity. In the Middle East, education is a currency, especially in countries like Jordan, where limited natural resources slow economic development. In these environments, investing in human capital becomes integral to national modernization and international competitiveness, so pursuing postsecondary education was never in question for us.

Then, between my junior and senior years in college, I had a life-changing experience that opened my eyes and heart to the power of education in empowering communities. I took part in a summer immersion program in an under-resourced and underserved part of San Jose, California, teaching summer school to elementary aged students, who were voluntarily enrolled in an academic remediation program hosted by a local church group. The philosophy of the group was that you can't *understand* a need until you *live* that need, so we lived near and among the community that we served.

We saw firsthand the impact of social and economic disparities on the community, yet we were always surrounded by laughter, joy, and hospitality. The students and their families were not victims of circumstance that needed saving or fixing; rather, they were testaments to courage and persistence in spite of circumstance.

They leaned into one another and accessed education as an investment in their own neighborhood. Every day that they came to school was an act of resistance and hope — it testified to their aspiration and focus to not let broader systems of advantage and disadvantage define their opportunities.

The lessons I learned have served as the backbone of my work ever since and continue to resonate in my work today as a professional learning leader. They shape my approach to equity-centered teaching and leadership, which I will explore in this ongoing column. Here are a few of the most central lessons that will underscore my upcoming thoughts and recommendations.

Lead with empathy: Listen first, design second.

I remember going into the classroom and seeing students in the same clothes multiple days in a row. The traditional narrative about students in this neighborhood would have led us to believe



FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the concepts in this column, listen to myPD Unplugged, the podcast about equity-centered professional learning hosted by Twal and his colleagues in Long Beach Unified School District in California. Each episode is accompanied by a discussion guide, which can be accessed by clicking on the episode's webpage. The podcast is available on all major podcast streaming services.

that it was because their families couldn't afford any others.

But I quickly came to understand a different story: that, for some, those were the students' best clothes, and their parents would not send them to school in anything less, such was their level of respect for education. I came to realize that many of the students and families saw school as a community anchor that served more than an academic purpose. It symbolized possibility, opportunity, and, in some cases, safety.

To this day, I encourage the educators with whom I work to reframe how they diagnose needs by taking time to learn the stories of students, colleagues, and community to gather empathy data. This data will center the humanity of the communities you serve and guide the professional learning that will help you to better meet their real needs.

Measure what you treasure.

If we want data to inform our professional learning, then we need to reframe it to challenge deficit-thinking about our students and communities. As Gholdy Muhammad (author of *Cultivating Genius*) challenges us: Rather than saying that 40% of our students are proficient on a specific metric and 60% are not, consider what happens when we say that our current system, curriculum, instruction, and professional learning are responsive to

only 40% of our students' needs. How might that change our response to and posture toward the data?

Serve the kids you have, not the ones you wish you had.

Our kids come to us with rich cultural and linguistic assets, and it is our job to mine those assets, center them, and learn from them. It is our job to draw out of the students the giftedness that every single one of them has and make sure that our curriculum, instruction, and professional learning support that effort.

Be a catalyst to help kids realize their potential.

Catalysts spark a reaction between two elements that would otherwise not interact to create a stable compound without leaving any traces of itself. True change does not always come with recognition. That can be tiring and frustrating. But we know we have made systemic change when equity-mindedness becomes an integral part of how we and our colleagues do our work. When the work is happening but we can't attribute it to a specific leader or initiative, that's a sign of success.

What really matters

Above all, the lesson that sticks with me from my first teaching experience is the feeling that this is what matters: to invest my life in others and amplify the assets that our kids and communities

bring into our classrooms. As a teacher, it was my responsibility to learn how to mine the students' talents so that each one of them achieved to their potential and education delivered on its promise of hope and opportunity. Now that I am a professional learning leader, I have an additional responsibility to help other educators make that investment and do that work.

Leading and learning for equity is a collective journey. We all have to take our own individual steps on that journey, but we also have to support and draw inspiration from one another. In the words of Robert F. Kennedy (1966): "Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, [he/she/they] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

REFERENCE

Kennedy, R.F. (1966, June 6). *Day of Affirmation address, University of Capetown, Capetown, South Africa* [Speech transcript]. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6-1966 ■

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would use a conversational, teaching-focused approach because all of the disagreements and debates were actually teachable moments.

It takes skill to deal with people who see the world differently. When I was a young teacher, those skills were just beginning to form — they were raw and undeveloped. But over time, I learned that there will be individuals on my staff who are just as passionate

about their beliefs and values as I am about mine. I learned how to disagree without being disagreeable. I became more strategic about the way I approach my staff on issues of race.

Those skills are imperative to be a leader who builds a school family. A school can't be a functioning community if its people are not mindful of how others see the world. The leadership lays the foundation for listening and looking through other lenses.

Leaders set the tone and inspire the courage for difficult, uncomfortable conversations. They set an expectation and establish a space for staff to think deeply and critically about their own beliefs and values relative to others'. With intentionality, leaders can build community, even in a divided school. They can bring people together as one school — one that serves every child. ■