



EQUITY STANDARDS

GIVE US THE POWER TO TRANSFORM OURSELVES AND OUR SCHOOLS

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At a time when it is unpopular to publicly stand up for equity, diversity, and inclusion, Learning Forward demonstrated its unwavering commitment to ensure equitable outcomes for all students by centering equity in its newest iteration of

Standards for Professional Learning. The standards articulate the foundational truth that “equity is both an outcome and aspect of professional learning” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 8). Together, the standards challenge us to think of professional learning as a vehicle for transformation.

The three equity standards push

professional learning facilitators to re-examine the the content (Equity Practices), the learning processes (Equity Drivers), and the conditions for learning (Equity Foundations) of effective adult learning. The equity standards, in conjunction with the other eight standards, bring to the forefront the key concepts that drive

any diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Full implementation of all 11 standards is a vehicle for systemic transformation that results in learning environments where all educators and students gain a sense of agency, belonging, respect, and engagement.

OUR STORY

The Learning Forward Foundation and the Learning Forward Affiliates established a community of practice in January 2022 to collectively deepen our understanding of the underlying concepts and goals of the equity standards and learn how to enact them in our work.

Affiliates are local branches of Learning Forward that build the capacity of educators in their states and provinces to design, facilitate, and assess high-quality professional learning. The Learning Forward Foundation provides grants and scholarships to support the development of individual educators and systems through high-quality professional learning. Both entities align their work closely with the standards and use them to define high-quality professional learning.

The placement of equity at the center of the standards not only drove our shared inquiry, but also led the two of us, as facilitators of the community of practice, to shift our practice as we attempted to answer this question: How might the three equity standards impact the work of those responsible for designing and facilitating professional learning?

We met with the community of practice for three collaborative sessions to construct new understanding of relevant content to help individuals become more aware of their social identities and how those identities

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influence their daily practice.

Between sessions, community members reflected on their insights, paid attention to how the ideas play out in their everyday lives, and then shared their reflections and insights at the next session. We developed the learning so that sessions built on one another.

While our primary focus was on understanding how to enact the three equity standards, we relied on the other eight standards to guide our design of high-quality professional learning for the community of practice.

For example, a first step in designing professional learning is to determine the outcomes of the learning. As the Professional Expertise standard articulates, educators “identify content for learning that both advances their practice and their abilities to collaborate to continually strengthen their shared power to excel” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 30).

The identified outcomes in turn dictate the necessary conditions for success and the transformational processes to employ. We believe it is the embedding of each equity standard within the categories of a professional learning system that provides an opportunity for transformative thinking and learning for educators.

Very quickly, we came to a general understanding of how the equity standards impact how professional learning is designed. We also became clearer about the capabilities required to lean into equity work. That’s not to say that the work is easy or quick. Rather, it is to say that we developed a vision of what it will take going forward to live up to and into the equity standards and a plan for steps to get there.

We invite you to reflect on three key insights, which we’ve organized around the three equity standards, consider their implications, and engage in generative thinking to drive your own practice.



Enacting the Equity Practices standard requires educators to develop the capability of cultural competence.

The Equity Practices standard calls for educators to understand their students’ historical, cultural, and societal contexts. In our opinion, cultural competence is a necessary capability for living into this standard.

In the book *We Can’t Lead Where We Won’t Go: An Educator’s Guide to Equity*, Gary Howard defines cultural competence as “the will and skill to form authentic relationships across distance” (Howard, 2015).

Cultural competence requires one to see difference and embrace the truth that difference makes a difference when trying to attain excellent educational outcomes for all students. Engaging in critical self-reflection about one’s social identities and its interface in

classrooms must become a regular part of educators’ practice.

We recognized that community of practice members needed to first increase their knowledge of themselves and recognize the presence of patterns of privilege and power, historical biases, and institutional racism within their educational settings. We refer to this as the inside-out approach.

The first session allowed community of practice members to recognize what occurs when differing backgrounds converge in the classroom. Cultural competence is the capability that helps educators draw on students’ historical, societal, and cultural differences and use that knowledge as a scaffold for student learning as opposed to becoming overwhelmed by the differences being presented. It provides a rich reservoir from which to develop multiple ways of learning, doing, and being.

Cultural competence is an emotionally charged topic that often creates discomfort. However, it is not to be avoided, as it is a central ingredient of equity work. If members were to deepen their awareness of the relationship among their social identities, implicit bias, and their behavior, we needed to scaffold the learning to allow for critical self-reflection and dialogue.

As participants explored their own and others’ experiences (via the sharing of personal narratives), feelings of discomfort surfaced. As facilitators, we created the space for participants to lean into and work through the dissonance. Leaning into the discomfort is part of excavating tacit beliefs that can result in harmful behaviors.

Another way the Equity Practices standard influences the design and implementation of professional learning is the content within the standard itself. Educators do not necessarily have knowledge of social justice and equity concepts as a regular aspect of their preservice preparation or inservice professional learning.

In other words, asking educators to take a deep dive into clarifying

how who they are impacts how they teach, relate to students, and handle curriculum is the essence of *equity-focused* professional learning. The equity standards expand the professional learning content by embedding equity concepts into the professional learning framework, thus elevating teaching and learning as instruments of social justice and equity.



The Equity Drivers standard expands the educator’s ability to recognize the role that the system plays in inequitable educational outcomes.

The Equity Drivers standard is in the standards frame labeled Transformational Processes. This frame describes “process elements of professional learning, explaining how educators learn in ways that sustain significant changes in their knowledge, skills, practices, and mindsets” (Learning Forward, 2022, p. 10).

Using this category as the foundation for the Equity Drivers standard offers the possibility for educators to experience new paradigms in how they think about themselves, the students they serve, and the choices they make in their daily practice.

The Equity Drivers standard widens educators’ examination to include their social identity, its interface in the classroom and school, and the wider sociopolitical context. Historically, our schools have been socialized by a dominant culture of society.

The Equity Drivers standard not only challenges educators to understand their own biases but also clarifies how their own socialization connects to institutional arrangements of power and privilege that create and perpetuate systemic inequities.

Additionally, the Equity Drivers standard acknowledges the role that school systems historically play in

marginalizing diverse students. It expands educator knowledge beyond the self to recognize patterns of privilege and power, historical biases, and institutional racism. The Equity Drivers standard challenges us to understand that inequity is incubated within systems.

As we moved into the second and third sessions, we provided opportunities for members to expand their knowledge, skills, and capabilities by exploring their social identities. As social justice scholar Bobbi Harro explains, “Our social identities — our gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, cultural group, age, and ability status — come to bear in the roles we are socialized to play throughout our lives” (Harro, 2000).

We engaged community of practice members in two learning experiences, one around social identity and the other around implicit bias. Our intention was to help members recognize the influence identity and bias exert on their daily decisions.

First, we asked educators to name their social identities, identify patterns of interaction with students and colleagues, and articulate what barriers might surface in the teaching and learning process due to the social structuring associated with their identities. Members started by highlighting the multiple dimensions of identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age) that make them whole. Next, they paired up to consider the ways their identities gave or denied them freedom and ease to move around society.

By naming their social identities, community of practice members uncovered what social privileges were or were not given to them. A question that resonated was: How did having or not having social privilege impact your ability to address and remove barriers to students’ learning? We noticed that empathy for one another increased as they shared their personal narratives.

To clarify how our beliefs and assumptions operate unconsciously,

we presented another opportunity for community of practice members to understand and explore their own implicit biases. Implicit bias refers to the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways. It is the mind's way of making uncontrolled and automatic associations between two concepts.

Community of practice members worked in pairs to answer questions about their colleague, their country of origin, home language spoken, neighborhood where they reside, favorite food, leisure activity, and fantasy vehicle. Their discussion was about the accuracy or inaccuracy of their perceptions, giving them greater insights into how implicit bias operates to promote inequity. Their willingness to explore their biases demonstrated a willingness to flex their cultural competency muscle.

In the third session, we examined critical consciousness. As Radd and Macey noted, "For professional learning to be transformative, it must have critical consciousness at its core" (Radd & Macey, 2013). It is a precursor to taking action to dismantle inequities in our educational system.

Critical consciousness is defined as "an active and persistent curiosity and awareness that examines beliefs, practices, assumptions, and norms to detect how power and privilege operate to contribute to inequality and oppression" (Friere, 2000). It is this capability that allows educators to recognize and grapple with issues of inequity embedded in system policies, practices, and structures.

We provided community of practice members with a brief introduction to critical consciousness and an opportunity to analyze ways in which the system sustains inequitable environments through its policies, practices, and structures. Central to this exploration are three important questions educators must answer: What are the assumptions undergirding my practice? Who benefits and who is

disadvantaged from these assumptions? What can I do differently to ensure that all students benefit?

As Brookfield wrote, "Thinking critically requires educators to check the assumptions that we, and others, hold by assessing the accuracy and validity of the evidence for these and by looking at ideas and actions from multiple perspectives" (Brookfield, 2012).



The Equity Foundations standard illuminates the complexity of enacting equity by articulating access points for transformative work. It holds the greatest promise of actualizing equity systemically.

The Equity Foundations standard is about the conditions necessary to achieve equity and the deliberate attention to context that is required for change. It challenges us to create a vision and expectation for equity and establish an inclusive and supportive culture where all voices are heard. To do so, we must recognize that equity work is both complex and multileveled.

We realized that professional learning for equity requires reimagining the structures and processes for adult learning, especially in our situation, where individuals were in different places along the continuum toward cultural competency. We came to understand that high relational trust is one condition that is critical when adult learners engage in inside-out work associated with centering equity in professional learning.

The Equity Foundations standard revealed several decision points around the design and facilitation of these learning sessions that helped in our planning, including scaffolding of the content, pacing, opportunities for dialogue, allocation of time, and grouping configurations.

The allotted 90 minutes once a month was our greatest challenge. Community of practice members hungered for time to share their narratives and explore ideas. To make the most of the time available, we limited small groups to pairs and triads. The smaller the group, the more airtime everyone was given. We also established working agreements that described supportive behaviors so people would feel safe and comfortable in being vulnerable.

GOING FORWARD

As facilitators of these professional learning sessions, we recognized that we, too, are learning. We learned the importance of breaking free of static notions of how professional learning must proceed, especially when centering equity.

We had to be intentional in our planning, conscious of the movement of the learning as evidenced by the questions, wonderings, and stuck points of learners. We were conscious that different beliefs systems and multiple perspectives were present and interacting in the process. We had to hold the interactions among members with humility and care as they shared stories of their lived experiences. During our debriefing sessions, we needed to be vulnerable with one another as we grappled with our own social identities and their impact on our decisions.

This was a dynamic learning space — full of possibility and full of hope. Everyone from the community of practice now knows more about themselves and about the system of inequities and how they work. The next phase is for each of us to take what we have learned and act on it. We need to spread the learning to others and use what we've learned in service of providing equitable learning experiences for all children.

Equity work is both complex and countercultural. It requires dismantling and interrupting oppressive practices,

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power and expertise to move states and districts in the right direction for their school community (Lebel, 2019).

A STEP FORWARD

The revised Standards for Professional Learning are an important step forward for ensuring all students have access to rigorous content and that all teachers know how to teach it. A recent paper released by the Carnegie Corporation of New York argues that innovations in professional learning have not been keeping pace with evolving expectations for teachers, the instructional materials they are using, and the rigorous content standards teachers are responsible for helping students meet (Short & Hirsh, 2020). The revisions in Standards for Professional Learning aim to address that gap by meeting the needs of teachers as they strive to inspire a love of learning and prepare all students for college and career.

The body of research and data on the impact of high-quality instructional materials is clear: Curriculum choices matter. But how teachers use curriculum matters even more.

Access to professional learning and the standards for ensuring that these

are high-quality learning opportunities have never been more important. Teachers deserve these resources. Studies tell us that it makes sense to provide curriculum at scale and that professional learning is key to successful implementation. Only then can we hope for impact to reach all classrooms.

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policies, and structures in a system that was designed to create and perpetuate inequity. The journey toward equity requires persistence and a willingness to be self-reflective and critical in our examination of our beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes, both individually and collectively. It demands we understand that we must enact equity on multiple levels simultaneously.

Embedding the equity standards in a comprehensive framework not only provides us a road map to systemic transformation but helps us center our most effective weapon against systemic racism: professional learning.

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