



Many of us have always been champions for equity, even if we haven't used that word or had a framework to describe it. Now we must tap into that longstanding commitment and determine how to move it forward.

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CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

HOW WE CAN SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER'S EQUITY JOURNEY

As educational equity has become a heated topic over the last few years, many educators who are passionate about meeting students' needs have been unsure what to say and do. Aware of the political and cultural battles being waged around them, they are wary of triggering hostile responses to their efforts to honor all students' experiences and backgrounds, teach a full and accurate curriculum, and address each child's strengths and challenges.

I witness these fears firsthand. Before giving a recent presentation to a school district, I was told, "Please don't mention the word 'equity' because it will cause too many problems." Colleagues have shared stories

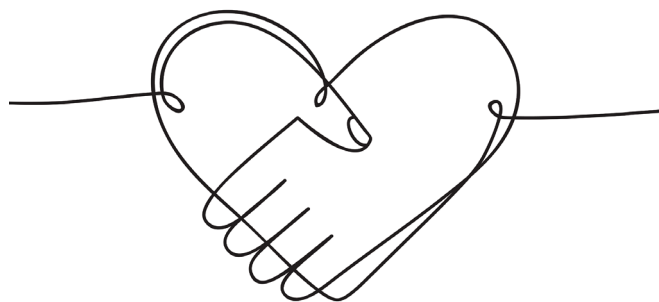
of teacher teams trying to figure out how to talk about slavery without offending anyone or worrying that they will be labeled biased for saying that it was wrong for a society to benefit from the unwilling labor of others.

Regardless of the understandable fears we're facing and the political noise around us, it's vital to stay

true to our purpose of serving every child. Many of us have always been champions for equity, even if we haven't used that word or had a framework to describe it. Now we must tap into that longstanding commitment and determine how to move it forward.

My equity journey started many years ago. A key part of its development came when I engaged with educators around the state of Ohio in a project to strengthen mathematics and science instruction, in part by becoming culturally responsive and aware of the many gifts their children brought to the classrooms. Other major steps included attending conferences of the National Association for Multicultural Education and the National Council of La Raza and becoming a member of my local National Alliance of Black School Educators affiliate. Throughout this journey, my goals have been to provide tools and resources to help educators who are fighting equity battles in small towns, big cities, and suburbs alike to equip teachers and leaders with strategies to meet the individual needs of each and every one of their students, no matter the context.

Each of us who cares deeply about equity has our own individual journey. But we are also on a collective equity journey, and we have the opportunity to learn from and support one another. As I am continually learning from and with others in the field, I offer a few pieces of advice and lessons learned in the hope that they can support your journey.



UNDERSTAND YOUR CONTEXT

One of the first steps in navigating today's cultural minefields is clearly understanding your local context. Amid a lot of political and public noise, it's important to know the facts. I recently met with educators in a state that had just passed controversial legislation about what educators can and cannot say about aspects of identity. When I asked the group how many of them had read the legislation, I learned that many of them hadn't taken the time or known how to do so. Instead, they had only depended on news articles or tweets to help them form their

understandings of the new policies and requirements. I had read the actual legislation and was surprised to see that many of the fears the educators expressed about what they couldn't say or do were not borne out in the law. Having a clearer understanding might have assuaged some of their fears and given them confidence to move forward with their work. And if the legislation had proved as restrictive as they feared, knowing the specifics could have helped them focus their response.

I encourage educators to read the legislation and then read what trusted colleagues and organizations in the state or province have written about the new rules. Reach out to your state education agency or ministry for support. The key is to become as informed as possible so that you can act accordingly.

REFOCUS ON YOUR PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

When I was a student teacher in Toledo, Ohio, my supervising teacher gave me some wise advice: You can never go wrong if you always put kids first. It's a simple idea, but one that became my core value and has guided me ever since. For me, the essence of the work is the essence of equity: making sure each child gets the resources and support they need to be successful. To do that, I need to learn about each child, including their background, family history, cultural values, strengths, and challenges.

When I became a principal, and now as the chief executive of Learning Forward, I apply this same core value to my teachers and staff, constantly asking myself, "How can I meet their needs so they can support educators and students?"

The values and beliefs of our organization also guide my thinking and actions about navigating equity challenges. Under the leadership of our board of trustees, the Learning Forward team developed the following values to guide our work internally and

externally:

- Focus on learning.
- Embrace equity and diversity.
- Collaborate for continuous improvement.
- Practice leadership with integrity.
- Demonstrate impact.

Knowing that equity is a key aspect of our organization's values lets our team members know they can be bold when pushing for equitable outcomes for all students and educators, and Standards for Professional Learning provide guidance for how we engage in equity actions. The three equity standards (Equity Practices, Equity Drivers, and Equity Foundations) remind us of the importance of attending to all the gifts students bring, our own biases and beliefs, and the equity structures and policies — written and unwritten — that exist around us. This foundation gives us solid ground to stand on as we face the equity headwinds.

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT THE LANGUAGE YOU USE

During a recent Learning Forward webinar (Harper et al., 2022), I shared the work of two organizations that have researched how the words we use can play a role in moving forward an equity agenda. Lake Research Partners conducted a series of surveys about how people of varying political affiliations respond to certain equity-oriented language. Based on the results, they advise not to use the word "equitable" because it is not broadly understood and instead opt for more specific language based on the situation.

For example, instead of saying, "We are providing equitable funding to our schools," get specific and say, "We are providing more funding for schools in communities that need the most help" and avoid vague calls for more funding in favor of specific targets for the funding, such as quality teachers and healthy meals. They also find that it's important to avoid jargon

— for example, people respond more favorably to phrases like "one-on-one attention" than "instructional time."

Framing is important, too.

The researchers recommend saying what you are for rather than what you are against and connecting problems to solutions by centering people and their lived experiences. For example: "Children can't form positive relationships with adults in their school if they don't feel safe or welcome, so let's create learning environments that foster social and emotional development."

Research from the Fordham Institute lends support to the notion that it's important for educators to think about how we describe our work (Tyner, 2021). Although educators often use the term "social and emotional learning," survey data showed that parents and citizens on both sides of the political spectrum disliked it. The term "life skills" resonated more positively. Furthermore, most respondents agreed on the importance of many of the key tenets of social and emotional learning programs even though they disliked the overall label. Although not specifically about equity, this study is a reminder that terminology matters.

AN ACT OF BRAVERY

Being a champion for equity can be challenging in today's politically charged atmosphere. It is an act of bravery that these times demand of us. As we all move forward, being as bold as our contexts allow, learning and leading together can buoy us and strengthen this work.

REFERENCES

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