**Suggested Title:** Going Slow to Go Fast: A Journey Toward Equity and Excellence

**Theme and Date of Issue:** February 2021: Looking Forward or December: Building Equity Through Professional Learning

Dr. Lisa Hess

Assistant Superintendent

Governor Mifflin School District

10 South Waverly Street Shillington, Pennsylvania 19607

610-621-9992 (cell) or 610-775-1461 X1125 (work)

**Word Count:**  2359

While at dinner in Boston in July 2019, my Learning Forward Academy team members and I had a conversation about equity in our schools. During that conversation, one of my team members recommended the book *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. The book hit me hard and exactly where I needed it to: in my own reflection. As a white female, it forced me to reflect on the fact that I, too, may have implicit bias due to my upbringing and experiences. I may not be explicitly biased, but not always seeing a situation through the experiences of others has not been at the forefront of my decision making. In addition, as a leader, it made me reflect on my district, the effect of implicit bias on our students, as well as the areas in which systematic racism exists. At the time, I was the director of teaching and learning for the district and I shared the book with my superintendent, assistant superintendent, and our human resources director. I needed them to know that we had to start looking at ourselves and reflecting on how our experiences as white men and women impacted the decisions we made for our district. Are we truly providing an equitable educational experience for ALL of our students?

I work in the same school district that I attended K-12 and graduated. At the time of my attendance, this suburban district of about 4300 students, was made up of about 98% white students mostly of a middle-upper class background and free and reduced lunch made up about 1% of families, if that. Today, our district has a minority population of 32% made up of mostly black and Latinx families and our free and reduced lunch population in the district has increased to 45%. The community has changed in terms of household income and racial diversity, but the mindset of many who work in the schools and live in the community unfortunately have not.

The term “nostesia,” coined by Jamie Vollmer in his book *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, refers to a combination of nostalgia and amnesia. According to Vollmer, “Nostesiacs hold a firm belief that the grand temples of learning that existed in their golden past were far superior to the schools we have today.” In turn, these same people also do not believe that change is necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners. Nostesia, which does not allow for reflection and change, is one of several reasons our district administration knew it had to develop a coalition to create change so that all students have access to a quality education free of bias.

In October 2019, the offering of a three part learning series titled *Equitable and Excellent: Schools Where All Student Succeed* led by Tyrone Howard, Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at UCLA was just the push my district needed to create an Equity and Excellence Guiding Coalition. Due to the awakening that occurred for me from the book *White Fragility*, I was moved to volunteer to be a member of the coalition. The rest of the coalition was made up of the central administrators with whom I shared the book, four principals, a school counselor,

Hess, 1

and eleven teachers from various grade levels. The series forced our coalition to have critical conversations around our district data related to attendance, discipline, AP course enrollment, curriculum, special education, gifted and talented access, staffing, and many other points of data. On the last day of the series, March 6, 2020, we conducted a SWOT analysis related to equity in our district. The series helped get us on the path to working on a more equitable school district and the coalition was ready to move into action.

Unfortunately seven days after our final learning series session, COVID-19 hit and schools were closed beginning March 13, 2020. The virus brought the coalition work to a halt since there were other immediate health issues taking priority. But, the learning did not stop for me because I knew the injustice and inequalities did not stop for our students and I wanted to be able to move as fast as possible when we returned to work. I read as many books as I could on racism, anti-racism, equity, culturally responsive teaching, privilege, cultural proficiency, inclusivity; the list could go on of the topics on which I tried to educate myself so that I could educate others through my daily leadership. Some books I read were educational-based and others were New York Times Best Sellers, but my objective was always to be ready to pick up the work when we were able to get the coalition back together and start making progress.

The death of George Floyd in May jolted the nation out of its focus on COVID-19 and brought racism and police brutality to the forefront of conversations. It is unfortunate that the death of this man had to remind this nation of its consistent ignorance at the systematic racism and police brutality that exists. It did, however, prompt our Pennsylvania School Board Association to release an anti-racism board resolution template that they encouraged all school districts to adopt. In July our school board passed an anti-racism board resolution, the first ever in the district.

Knowing that many in our community were being personally impacted by the recent events of injustice and knowing we were far from the experts on equity and social justice issues, our superintendent connected with Dr. Nicole Hollins Sims, an educational consultant with the state who works with districts on issues related to equity and social justice to continue the coalition work that was halted in March.

When we were finally able to get back together online in August, our coalition, along with the help of Dr. Hollins Sims, completed an internal assessment using an adaptation of an Equity Audit Tool front he Mid-Atlantic Equity Center. The results of this tool formed the basis for the guiding coalition’s one year action plan that would create immediate work to launch us forward

Hess, 2

with the district community.

In September, the coalition took the action plan and identified three priority areas for immediate focus: Establish and conduct a learning series with a group of teachers, students, staff, parents, community members that volunteer to be part of this initial outreach and engagement; Disaggregate a more robust series of data points (perception, academic, demographic, process) for a clearer understanding of current context; and Create family and community engagement opportunities to help inform our work moving forward.

At this point in reading this, you may be saying to yourself, “Well, that is all and good, Lisa. But it has been a year since your district started this journey and I do not see much impact. When are you going to start putting your work into action?”

In the beginning of this work, our coalition wanted to move as fast as we possibly could because we felt like we did not have time to waste and had a lot of catching up to do. We talked about how we could help teachers prepare for coming back to school after a spring/summer of injustice and protests. We wanted to do book studies and develop lesson plans around topics related to teaching antiracism and other topics around equity to push out to our staff. We realized that our coalition still had their own learning to do before they could lead others. Building a foundation of knowledge around topics of such a sensitive nature takes time for that learning to occur in order to do it well. We did not want to move slowly, but we wanted to do this right. We struggled with those opposing forces in this work.

In October 2020, educational consultant Dr. Hollins Sims asked a few representatives from the coalition to be a part of an online equity learning series put on by the department of education. We were hesitant because we did not feel that we were anything close to the experts on equity and as you probably felt a few paragraphs ago, we did not feel that we had made much progress in our work as a coalition. Dr. Hollins Sims explained that people attending the online series would appreciate our honesty in where we are in our learning and in our work. She was right. The group of about fifty educators appreciated that we were willing to be vulnerable enough to share that we were not experts and that we were taking our work one step at a time. We shared our school district demographics, discipline and academic data, our community mindset, and our personal experiences that were our impetus for wanting to formally begin a journey in evaluating and improving or enhancing equitable practices. We also shared our challenges, concerns, and next steps in our work. It actually felt good to not be the experts and to be transparent in our answers to the questions that the audience members were posing to us. They did appreciate that we were not just going through the motions of equity work, but that we were being intentional

Hess, 3

every step of the way even if it was taking longer than we would have liked it to. Regardless of the good feelings from this presentation, our coalition was still struggling with the fact that we were still in the planning phase and not implementing any action steps. We needed some additional confirmation.

In November 2020 a Brene Brown podcast with Aiko Bethea titled *Inclusivity at Work: The Heart of Hard Conversations* solidified for me that our coalition should be moving at the exact pace it is currently moving. While listening to the podcast, something that struck me was that although we want to talk about racism and equity, people of color may not be ready to talk about it. Just because white America is saying “we are now ready to talk about race,” people of color who have always been hurt by the systematic racism that exists may not be ready because they are so used to compartmentalizing it. We need to think: Who is it we are serving by doing this work? How are we serving them and are we intentional in it? It made me think that although we may want to move faster, our slower and more intentional work may be what serves everyone best. At that moment, I decided to email the podcast to my team to give them that additional confirmation from which they were seeking: We are exactly where we need to be.

In December 2020, I attended a session on Equity at the Learning Forward Conference that changed the way I thought about approaching the implementation of change around equity in my district. The presenters, Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple, based their session on the book they co-authored titled *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity.* The authors started out by talking about the steps that districts typically take in their equity work. First, there is a catalyst or a major event (local or national) that makes the district start the equity work. Next, leadership comes out and states that the inequities that exist and/or the events that have occurred, “This is not who we are!” Next, there are statements of personal declarations such as social media hashtags that are used. Next, a committee is developed, which in many cases they recommend some sort of mandatory training to begin to address the problem. The district realizes that they are not equipped to do this work, so they hire an expert in equity because there is no shared vision within the committee. Eventually, the committee rationalizes inaction and the work fades away across time and then the work dies. When action needs to take place that is where organizations fail in the equity work.

Listening to Floyd and John made my stomach sick. I started thinking to myself, “Oh no! This sounds like the exact steps our district has taken in this work! We have wasted all this time and we are on the wrong path! We are going to fall into the inaction trap they are referring to!” I was devastated to think we had to start over in order to be successful in this work. I shared this disappointment in my breakout group and they assured me that the work we have already done is

important and that we may just need to readjust to ensure that the coalition follows through in the

Hess, 4

actions it recommends.

Feeling better, thanks to my breakout group mates, I was ready to hear what Floyd and John recommended as a course of action. The authors talked about the Three Keys of Inclusion, Belonging, and Dignity. The first key is to inspire a shared vision of educational equity and of inclusion. They noted that diversity does not provide us with a vision and that the work is not about diversity as a focus, but our response to diversity. The second key is to assess the climate for belonging. Belonging means more than access; it means you have full membership. The third key is to take action that honors dignity. If we can shape a culture of dignity, it creates a feeling of belonging, which in turn increases engagement and increases performance. That is where we start! We need to focus our efforts on ensuring that everyone in this district has a sense of belonging and their dignity is honored every single day! This is what our coalition actions need to reflect to make a lasting impact!

These key items are specific actions that I will take back to my committee. I know it is going to take some time to develop the specific steps around these actions, but now I actually feel as if we have actionable items that the coalition can move on to make an impact in my district.

As you can see, my learning and work around equity has been ongoing for a year and a half, yet I feel that I am now poised to lead our coalition to engage in impactful action in 2021 and beyond. Sometimes, going slow to go fast is what is called for to make a lasting impact.

Hess, 5