Leadership for Equity

By Rhonda Barton and Rob Larson

Despite NCLB and other national initiatives aimed at closing the achievement gap, racial and economic disparities remain an everyday reality throughout our education system. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2007) pointed out:

> While we bemoan the dramatically unequal educational outcomes announced each year in reports focused on the achievement gap, as a nation we often behave as though we are unaware of—or insensitive to—the equally substantial inequities in access to educational opportunity that occur from preschool through elementary and secondary education, into college and beyond. (p. 318)

Today, 40% of Black or Latino students attend schools that are 90%–100% minority; fewer than one-third attended such schools in 1988. In contrast, only 8% of White students attend schools in which at least half of all students are minorities and, in fact, the average White student attends a school that is 80% White (Coleman, Negrón, & Lipper, 2011). So-called "majority-minority" schools are more likely to have deficits in the availability of highly qualified teachers, high-quality curriculum, personal attention to students, and access to advanced coursework—all of which contribute to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

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Just the Facts

- Schools that primarily served Black students were twice as likely to have teachers with only one or two years of experience, as compared to schools in the same district serving mostly White students (US Department of Education, 2011, para. 3).

- Leaders must be capable and willing to address persistent gaps in achievement and practices that marginalize students of color and other underrepresented groups (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

- Evident in all of these strategies is that "principals influence equity indirectly, by increasing the technical skills of staff, transforming their beliefs about equity, and strengthening school partnerships with parents and the community" (Ross & Berger, 2009, pp. 465–472).

- Theoharis (2007) noted that changing tracking or segregation models "was not only a pedagogical or learning shift but also a moral act" (pp. 234–235).

- Many demonstrated a "whatever it takes" philosophy to apply their leadership values and pursued creative ways to validate, build trust with, and seek understanding of their increasingly diverse students (Larson, 2008, p. 146).

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Education Duncan remarked, "These data show that far too many students are still not getting access to the kinds of classes, resources, and opportunities they need to be successful" (US Department of Education, 2011, para. 3). The data, drawn from a biennial survey of 7,000 school districts and more than 72,000 schools, showed that 3,000 of the schools surveyed did not offer Algebra 2 classes—which affected nearly a half-million high school students. Similarly, more than 2 million students had no access to calculus classes. Schools that primarily served Black students were twice as likely to have teachers with only one or two years of experience, as compared to schools in the same district serving mostly White students (US Department of Education, 2011, para. 3).

There are also disparities in other socioeconomic metrics, with widening gaps between students from high- and low-income families in such areas as college entry, persistence, and graduation. For example, rates of college completion increased by 4 percentage points for low-income students born around 1980 when compared to students born in the 1960s. For students from high-income families, the college completion rates increased by 18 points during that same period (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Against this backdrop, there is an increasing call for educational leaders to place issues of equity at the center of their practice. More specifically, leaders must be capable and willing to address persistent gaps in achievement and practices that marginalize students of color and other underrepresented groups (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The role of the principal can't be overstated in fostering an environment where all students—no matter their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or location—have the conditions and resources to support their right to learn. A recent report by the Wallace Foundation (2011) cited research showing

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that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that affect student learning in school" (p. 3). Although school leadership is ideally shared among administrative staff members, teachers, and even parents and community members, the Wallace Foundation argued that "the principal remains the central source of leadership influence" and that he or she holds the responsibility for "shaping a vision of academic success for all students…[that is] based on high standards" (p. 4).

Achieving educational equity demands that leaders intentionally adjust inputs into the educational system: providing greater resources, targeting professional learning for educators, and changing educational practices and processes. However, Gutiérrez and Jaramillo (2006) have asserted that equal inputs, although they may achieve the goal of fairness and similar treatment, do not necessarily result in just outcomes. To achieve true equity, there must be an intentionally different level of support to meet the most urgent student needs.

Domains of Principal Influence

In examining the research on leadership for equity, Ross and Berger (2009) considered four domains of principal influence: curriculum interpretation, instruction, assessment, and community involvement. As their starting point, the researchers used the definition of education equity provided by Singleton and Linton (2006), "raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest-performing students; and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories" (p. 463). Further, Ross and Berger emphasized that if principals are to create schools that are equitable, they must engage all staff members as partners in the effort (pp. 465–472).

In the first domain of **curriculum interpretation**, Ross and Berger (2009) listed four strategies to enhance equity:

- **Encourage staff members to talk about issues of diversity, values, and social justice.** This involves developing a shared conception of the school's mission and establishing ways for potentially uncomfortable discussions about diversity and fairness to take place.
- **Model equity beliefs for staff members.** Principals' attitudes toward equity not only affect policy but also influence teachers' beliefs and practices. In modeling those beliefs through daily interactions with staff members, students, and parents, principals must be willing to confront racist language and racial stereotypes.
- **Clarify misconceptions about equity.** Misconceptions about equity can surface in a number of ways, including student and teacher expectations about certain social groups; the ways in which racism is defined, and a belief in a "deficit" theory of diversity that holds that underachievement by poor students is a result of cultural factors. Principals must expose and refute misconceptions and take a moral stand that all students have the fundamental right to participate in all school activities.
- **Create a safe, affirming school environment.** School leaders must move beyond legal compliance to create an environment in which all students feel welcomed and valued. This may involve creating support networks for students who may be subject to harassment because of cultural, sexual, or gender identity.

When it comes to **instructional practices**, the researchers suggested the following steps:

- **Enable teachers to provide students with the support they need.** Principals can support the development of culturally relevant lessons that connect to students' diverse traditions; foster partnerships among mainstream teachers and other staff members to provide extra scaffolding for students who need it; and offer release time, visits to other schools, and other resources.
- **Provide all students with access to the whole curriculum.** All students should be able to participate in a wide range of instructional practices, especially those that promote deep conceptual understanding. Principals can use school resources to equalize opportunities for students who may have limited access to home computers and cultural activities outside of school.
- **Recognize the potential for bias in special education identification.** Principals can help teachers be aware of the potential for—and dangers of—placing racial and cultural minority students in low curricular tracks.
- **Support research-based instructional practices.** Principals can provide access to several research-based comprehensive school reform models, engage teachers in lesson study, and examine instruction through identified problems of practice that address disparities in student performance.

The strategies that Ross and Berger (2009) recommend in the domain of influencing **assessment and evaluation** are:

- **Monitor progress toward achievement gap reduction.** In high-achieving schools, instructional decisions are driven by data. To promote equity, individual student data should be aggregated into meaningful categories that allow schools to track progress in reducing gaps and to monitor the effectiveness of steps directed at that goal.
- **Use appropriate accommodations for assessments.** Principals can help teachers match student needs to accommodations that increase the validity and fairness of assessments.
- **Discourage strategies that involve gaming the accountability system.** The practice of

manipulating test procedures to inflate scores works against reducing achievement gaps. Principals should guard against excluding certain types of students in reporting results and engaging in inappropriate test preparation.

- **Celebrate all achievement gains.** School leaders must avoid "academic triage" in which instructional resources are focused on students closest to passing assessments. Students who do not meet state standards but do make gains should be recognized for their efforts.
- **Increase the reliability of assessments for diverse student populations.** Reliability or consistency of assessments is important to ensure that changes in scores reflect student performance and not changes in the test itself or the tester.
- **Avoid cultural, linguistic, and gender bias in tests.** Students should not be penalized by test items that call for background knowledge that may be lacking in certain groups. Principals can facilitate discussions among staff members about whether bias is evident and how specific test items might affect different student populations.

In the last domain, **community involvement**, Ross and Berger (2009) recommended two strategies:

- **Recognize the expertise of parents and community members.** Family and community members can bring a wealth of experience to the school. Principals can tap into this social capital by encouraging teachers to become familiar with students' home culture and religion and by helping teachers find ways in which cultural knowledge can be used to scaffold instruction.
- **Create partnerships with parents to support learning.** Principals should take active steps to engage parents in home activities that support learning. They should also explore partnerships with social service agencies and opportunities for service learning in the broader community.

Evident in all of these strategies is that "principals influence equity indirectly, by increasing the technical skills of staff, transforming their beliefs about equity, and strengthening school partnerships with parents and the community" (Ross & Berger, 2009, p. 472).

Social Justice Leaders

Theoharis (2007) conducted an empirical study of principals "who came to the field with a calling to do social justice work" (p. 222). In analyzing the accomplishments and challenges of those social justice advocates, he found that they were able to raise student achievement, improve school structures, build staff capacity, and strengthen school culture and community. To do so, they eliminated pullout models for special education and English language learner students that they deemed discriminatory, replacing such classes with heterogeneously grouped instruction. In addition, the principals increased rigor and access to educational opportunities and pushed for increased accountability among staff members for the achievement of all students. Theoharis (2007) noted that changing tracking or segregation models "was not only a pedagogical or learning shift but also a moral act" (pp. 234–235). Such structural changes challenged the belief that traditionally marginalized students do poorly because of their own deficiencies. Rather, the principals in the study considered that student failure might be the result of a fundamentally unjust system.

In enhancing staff capacity, the principals directly addressed issues of race, provided ongoing training that focused on equity, empowered staff members with greater professional freedom, and hired specifically with social justice in mind. They reached out to the community and sought nontraditional ways to engage the families of disenfranchised students, including multilingual forums and culturally relevant school events.

Theoharis (2007) noted that those principals' actions met resistance within their schools and their immediate communities. Parental objections, the pull of the status quo, unsupportive central office administrators, and obstructive staff attitudes all presented barriers. The principals were able to sustain the work, however, by developing proactive strategies that included creating a supportive administrative network, prioritizing the work, and communicating more intentionally. Perhaps most importantly, they stayed committed to making their schools more equitable.

Value-Driven Practice

In another study of critical educational leadership to support equity, Larson (2008) found that leaders entered such practice from various points and developed it in very different ways. Some leaders were driven by their existing value systems and others credited a precipitating event or catalyst. Still others were motivated by their colleagues' support or inspired by their peers' actions.

The leaders sought ways to interact more effectively with the multiple cultures represented in their schools and districts and actively engaged in discussions about race and equity. They infused their values into programs and activities, hiring practices, resource allocation, and instructional leadership. As instructional leaders, they implemented effective strategies that eliminated the predictability of achievement on the basis of race and used an equity lens when examining pedagogy through learning walks, peer observation, and student work samples. Many demonstrated a "whatever it takes" philosophy to apply their leadership values and pursued creative ways to validate, build trust with, and seek understanding of their increasingly diverse students (Larson, 2008, p. 146).

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Treating each parent with respect and inviting parents to serve on diversity committees were two strategies that the school leaders used to ensure that all voices were heard and present in school decision making. The leaders also looked for opportunities to engage in school- and district-based community activities to build bridges to minority populations. Finally, some principals took on advocacy roles and worked with underrepresented groups to actively challenge the status quo. It was common for principals and district leaders to openly address institutional racism in public venues as well as challenge racist or intolerant comments.

From his research, which included 123 education leaders, Larson (2008) compiled the following recommendations for practice:

- Build common understanding for a reason to lead.
- Demonstrate courage to confront authentic challenges in leadership development.
- Design and sustain nested opportunities for professional learning.
- Create cross-system collaborative approaches to examine leadership practice from multiple perspectives.
- Provide opportunities to develop skills for addressed equity.
- Model the courageous dialogue that is necessary to understand and confront the power relations within racism and classism.
- Identify distinctions between leader intention and action.
- Examine the ways in which you are part of the problem (systemic inequities) and the solution (equitable leadership).
- Be open to new learning about equitable practice.
- Take a risk you have not taken before. (pp. 200–202)

Leaders for equity are educators who gracefully stand up and stand for others, demonstrate courage, and take risks to forge improvement.

Conclusion

Educational leaders must be bold if they are to authentically and successfully confront the situations in our schools that cause inequities. Leaders must examine the root causes of disparities and question the fundamental assumptions of our current educational practices within which inequities thrive.

At its core, leadership for equity is grounded in efficacy, action, and reflection (Larson, 2008). *Efficacy* is the ability to articulate values in practice that connect to strong ethical foundations of justice grounded in our laws and society. *Productive action* is an artifact of equitable practice that consists of high-leverage steps to improve outcomes for every student. Leaders for equity are educators who gracefully stand up and stand for others, demonstrate courage, and take risks to forge improvement. They are buoyed by the confidence that they are doing the right thing. They also participate in reflection on their practice in concert with others. Leaders for equity are humbled by the significance of their work and are motivated by learning in action. In this process of demonstrating efficacy, action, and reflection, leaders for equity have the capacity to catalyze momentum to create improved access and opportunity and outcomes for every student. **PRR**

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