Race & Education
Equity, integration and rigor in culturally diverse schools

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BY MATT UTTERBACK
How his adopted brother’s struggles prompted a superintendent to confront the power of white privilege and build an inclusive learning environment across his suburban Portland district.

Choosing Integration and Making It Last
BY ALLISON RODA AND PAUL L. TRACTENBERG
The Morris, N.J., schools present a rare counter-story to segregated and unequal education — one of the nation’s most racially and socioeconomically diverse districts.

Recruiting Our ‘Missing’ Students
BY CHRIS BELCHER
A superintendent details his mission to enroll under-represented students in Advanced Placement classes.

Equity Goals and Equity Visits
BY THOMAS HATCH AND RACHEL ROEGMAN
Participants in a superintendent network jointly study each other’s diverse schools in pursuit of high-leverage academic goals.

Combating Hatred Among Us
BY TERRANCE L. FURIN
A racially charged exchange between two school leaders reveals the pressing need for sustained reflection on our core democratic values.

Becoming an Ally in the Battle for Social Justice
BY VERONICA MCDERMOTT
What a former Long Island superintendent and author of a book on the subject has learned about white privilege as she promotes multicultural understanding.
I grew up in a small town on the Oregon coast in a family of educators. My grandfather was a high school assistant principal, and my father was a high school counselor. I was raised middle class with the privilege that comes with being male, white and the son of well-educated parents. I knew the dominant community norms and used them to my advantage. Unlike many in our communities today, college always was a likely option for me.

When I was 9, my parents adopted a 7-year-old boy from a Korean orphanage. My brother Jon was one of the few people of color in our community. From my brother’s perspective, no one else looked like him or sounded like him, and it was likely no one in our community had shared many of his experiences. Jon settled into our neighborhood elementary school and quickly learned English.

However, as my brother approached his early adolescent years, his struggles began to emerge. He began making statements such as “No one understands me” and “No one looks like me.” These were the first signs we were losing him. These struggles of identity were quickly followed by behavioral issues and poor academic achievement. My parents sought professional help and tried different schools, but nothing was successful. We continued to lose him.

When my brother was 18, he asked my parents if he could return to Korea. However, because Jon did not have a degree...
or any career training, he was not welcomed back to his native country. Being rejected by both his native and adopted countries, my brother asked to move to Hawaii where there was a larger Asian population. My brother made this move, but the years of enduring significant marginalization and rejection in his young life had taken their toll, and Jon completed suicide. We had lost him.

Affirming Identity
What I know today that I didn’t know 30, 20 or even 10 years ago is that while many would say they had the best intentions of supporting my brother, the community, the school system and I, as his brother, did a poor job of affirming his identity and honoring his history and culture. Instead, dominant systems worked tirelessly to get Jon to conform to the white-majority norms and customs. Clearly, the result of these efforts was devastating.

Twenty years after my brother’s passing, I began to unpack his struggles and his story. I viewed my brother’s actions through the lens of my white identity. When I did this, I was incapable of seeing the reality of his experiences as an outsider.

While I had experienced the stark reality of my brother’s passing on a personal level, I had not recognized the impact of ignorance and racism on my brother’s life. I learned my whiteness matters, and I began to understand the power, privilege and responsibility that comes from being a white male with rank.

Stepping outside of my reality and expected norms wasn’t easy or comfortable, but it was essential. It was essential in my recognition that a person’s life is meant to be lived authentically without having to wear masks or costumes hiding one’s true self.

Strength Assets
Much of our success in our school district has been the result of our school system embracing equity and creating inclusive learning environments for each student. Equity is not about treating everyone the same. That is equality. Equity has us look at each student as an individual, affirm his or her identity and build upon the strengths each student possesses.

I don’t think my brother’s story is all that different from the stories of many individuals in our schools today. The harder we try to make students fit into the white-dominant community, the harder they resist and ultimately suffer. When students, parents and colleagues have to conform to majority standards and customs, they are detrimentally impacted.

Today, despite the best of intentions, we still lead school systems where a student’s gender, skin color, home language and family income level continue to be the predictors of who does and does not graduate from our schools. Our school systems continue to perpetuate both opportunity and achievement gaps for many of our student groups. The Center for Educational Leadership out of the University of Washington believes the “nexus for eliminating the achievement/opportunity gap lies in the development of an environment of care, safety and respect” as outlined below.

Building an Environment of Care, Safety and Respect
Creating and maintaining a learning and work environment that holds at its center a sense of sincere caring, safety and respect is critical to student success.

It can be easy to become caught up in simply completing daily tasks. Building inclusive learning environments for each student requires leaders to act beyond mere task completion. Paul Gorski, who directs EdChange, a Virginia-based consulting firm that works to cultivate equity literacy in schools, offers the following strategies to become a more equitable education leader:

▶ Pronounce every individual’s full name correctly. No student or staff member should feel the need to shorten or change her or his name to make it easier for others to pronounce.
▶ Explore how one’s own identity impacts the way one sees and experiences different people.
▶ Grow, learn and change at the same rate the world is changing. By doing so, leaders won’t lose touch with the lives of students with whom they interact. Be open to learning from the experiences of others and being challenged by diverse perspectives.
▶ Be open to critique. Be dedicated to listening actively and modeling a willingness to be changed by the presence of others to the same extent they are necessarily changed by you.
▶ Center student voices, interests and experiences into conversations and decision making.

It is important for those of us working in K-12 education to take the time to reflect on our behavior as a means to ask why we do what we do. When educators undertake this reflection, it allows us to examine the impact our actions have on others and has us consider if we are moving toward a stance of inclusion, as opposed to inadvertently excluding others.

— MATT UTTERBACK
of leadership capacity — specifically, nurturing the will to act on behalf of the most underserved students while increasing leadership knowledge and skill to dramatically improve the quality of instruction.”

We are the leadership required to make a difference for our students. It rests on our shoulders and within our sphere of influence to eliminate the opportunity and achievement gaps that exist for so many of our students.

**Six Principles**

As educational leaders, how do we cultivate equity in our schools and classrooms? This is a question that deeply resonates with me because it presents a challenge for those of us charged with improving student achievement. It took me years to understand that in leading my North Clackamas colleagues, my role was to help them recognize that privilege matters in questions of equitable access to education.

We wrestle with the issues of privilege, white-dominant culture and expectations in our school system. We’ve found a strong interplay exists among instructional practices, equity and leadership. At the intersection of these concepts lie six principles that we can follow that have a profound impact on our students — especially our traditionally underserved populations.

**No. 1: Our job as educational leaders is to improve our ability to notice, acknowledge and promote the replication of strong instructional practices.**

This is about knowing what quality instruction is and what it is not. It is about learning and being an expert in the teaching and learning continuum that serves as the basis for teacher evaluation.

We know students will miss out on powerful life opportunities if they are not successful learners. Research tells us the single biggest factor in student achievement is teacher quality. The second is educational leadership. Our primary job as school leaders must be the improvement of instruction.

Many of the best instructional practices promoting equity are already occurring within our schools and classrooms. However, we must be aware of the impact of strong instructional practices and how they contribute to a culture of equity for our students. This includes recognizing that privilege matters in questions of equitable access to education.
classrooms. Modeling and replicating those practices is a critical component of professional learning. Leaders charged with the task of leading instructional improvement must know — through an equity lens — what effective and high-quality teaching looks like.

► No. 2: We must identify and change our practices and beliefs so that each child knows she or he is expected to succeed.

We must recognize that our students can’t and won’t rise if our expectations are low. We must hold firm to the belief that all students are expected to be able to realize their potential. This includes establishing high standards and making it clear to students what the criteria are for meeting them.

We must avoid overpraising for mediocre work. Students perceive this as a sign of lower expectations and another reason not to trust feedback. We must normalize help-seeking behaviors — especially for our boys. We must share with students our views that intelligence is malleable. When students learn this, they demonstrate higher academic motivation, behavior and achievement.

► No. 3: We must learn who our students are and focus on where they want to go.

Relationships are critical. We must learn about our students as individuals and embrace our role in helping them develop and discover their identity. We must convey a fundamental belief in each student that he or she can develop their intellect and their critical capacity to think. We do this when we build relationships with our students and recognize the racial, cultural and economic differences that impact a growth mindset.

We do this when we talk about race and the building of a student’s racial identity. We must build in time to listen to our students — to learn their hopes and fears. In North Clackamas, we’ve used student affinity groups to listen to our students’ stories and acknowledge their experiences.

To assist our staff in being able to talk about race, every staff member is expected to attend a two-day, race-focused equity training. In addition, our teachers have the opportunity to participate in a full-year instructional equity cadre. When we share in these types of experiences, when we hear the voices of our students and staff, we learn about each other and we are compelled to change our practices.

► No. 4: We must embrace an equity commitment.

As students enter our nation’s classrooms each day, they are doing so under a cloud of vulnerability, fear and confusion. The daily hurtful rhetoric in our communities and across our nation has the potential of producing alarming levels of anxiety among children of color and inflaming gender, racial, religious and ethnic tensions in our classrooms.

As educators, we must be committed to protecting our students, families and each other. This means interrupting when we hear or see offensive words and acts and communicating daily to each student that we will protect, advo-

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**An Equity Lens for Equitable Decisions**

Author and entrepreneur Seth Godin, in his blog The Permanent Rules, discusses the need for a new approach to decision making. He says taking the time to examine our previous decisions reminds us that rules are fluid.

New situations present opportunities to effect positive change. The only way a school system can improve is when leaders decide that a permanent rule, something that we would normally consider never changing, has to change. And then it does.

We need to recognize that our context is continually changing and that requires us to revisit the rules we have grown comfortable with and accustomed to maintaining.

When as superintendents we make decisions and take action, we should apply a series of equity-related questions:

► Does this decision align with our mission/vision?
► Whom does this decision affect both positively and negatively?
► Does the decision being made ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences?
► Are those being affected by the decision included in the process?
► What other possibilities are being explored?
► Is the decision/outcome sustainable?

Education leaders must own this type of questioning and decision making if we are to become school systems where a student’s gender, skin color, home language and family income level no longer predict who does and does not graduate from our schools.

As education leaders, we must be compelled to begin altering the rules that are having a detrimental impact on student performance and start building new rules, policies and systems that benefit each student.

— MATT UTTERBACK

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cate for and value them equally no matter their race, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, language or ethnicity.

When we take these actions, we model for our students what we want to hear and see from them. One of the most powerful skills we can teach our students is to engage in respectful conversations. This is the foundation for civil discourse. When we allow our students to listen to one another and when we create space for multiple and diverse perspectives on various issues, we develop competent and critical thinkers.

► No. 5: We should use our leadership to create inclusive learning environments for each student.
I am proud of our school board and proud to be the superintendent of a school district that is not only talking about equity but is bringing equitable practices into our operations, our classrooms, our resource allocations and the lives of our students.

Our district took a stance and publicly committed to this important work through policy. We have an equity policy because, like all school districts, student success in North Clackamas is currently predetermined by race, gender, ethnicity, culture, poverty, language and disability. We cannot accept this, and that is why we commit to continuous improvement, knowing that our work is never done.

► No. 6: We should consider our ethical and moral obligation to take action.
Despite this obligation, it’s often easier to settle for a simpler, quieter path. We must not give lip service to education equity, only to accept the status quo. We say we want to be a school system that provides access and opportunity for each student, but in the interim, we keep using the same practices and systems we’ve always used.

This strategy isn’t working for a significant number of our students. As educational leaders, we need to take care of what is most important and not keep the same old routines.

Matt Utterback

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Additional Resources
Matt Utterback recommends the following informational resources that his district uses to move the equity work forward in the North Clackamas schools.

BOOKS
► Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation by Beverly Daniel Tatum, Beacon Press, 2007
► Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain by Zaretta Hammond, Corwin, 2015
► Leading for Instructional Improvement: How Successful Leaders Develop Teaching and Learning Expertise by Stephen Fink and Anneke Markholt, John Wiley & Sons, 2011
► Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children by Lisa Delpit, The New Press, 2013

MISCELLANEOUS
► AASA Equity Website, www.aasa.org
► National Equity Project, Oakland, Calif., http://nationalequityproject.org
► Oregon Center for Educational Equity, Portland, www.edequityoregon.com

Sharp Gains
Building from these six principles has had a profound impact on student achievement in North Clackamas. Graduation rates are up 14 percent in the past five years, nearly 90 percent of freshmen are on track to graduate at the end of their freshman year, and our district boasts some of the highest attendance rates in Oregon.

Taking these actions has a cumulative effect that creates a culture of success. When we repeat these actions, it creates momentum. When we build momentum, we positively impact the trajectory for each of our students, allowing them to reach their full potential.
More than 60 years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision condemned segregated schools, most of the country’s schools still labor under the vise of segregation. Indeed, the situation seems to be worsening even in the South, where Brown had its greatest impact. One of the latest examples of resegregation involves wealthy white communities seceding from larger more diverse school districts to create new segregated districts.

Morris School District in New Jersey offers a rare counter-story to segregated and unequal education

Northern New Jersey, however, is home to a hopeful counter-story. It involves the creation and ongoing development of one of the nation’s most racially and socioeconomically diverse districts — the 5,200-student Morris School District.

Some would say the merger between the Morristown and Morris Township school districts happened in the unlikeliest of times and places. The year was 1971, when the work of trying to implement Brown outside of the South was
beginning to prove problematic. Suburban Morris County, N.J., was a predominantly white, upper-income and conservative area of the state. Nonetheless, the state’s education commissioner, Carl Marburger, a former school administrator in Detroit and a bona fide education progressive, acted on a power just given him by the New Jersey Supreme Court to order the merger of two separate and unequal school districts. The purpose was to prevent *de facto* segregation caused by housing patterns and changing demographics and to ensure racial balance in the schools.

The early years were not easy, though. The *New York Times* reported in 1973 on the “painful” and “agonizing” process of the forced merger, which the newspaper said had been “plagued by controversies and numerous [law] suits.” There was fierce opposition to the merger and predictions of massive white flight (which did not actually happen).

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What the news media failed to mention, though, was that the merger’s proponents were a diverse group of individuals who proactively and heroically stopped segregation in its tracks because they believed in racial justice and opportunity for all. This original pro-merger group came to be supported over the 46-year history of the unified Morris district by key school leaders, teachers, school board members and a critical mass of the broader community.

Impressive Strides

The fact so many school districts nationwide, as well as in New Jersey, have turned their backs on school desegregation and integration efforts in the decades since Brown makes the Morris district stand out. In our three-year research project, we have engaged in extensive legal and policy analysis, 100 stakeholder interviews, school observations and quantitative analysis and mapping. We got a close look at the role local district leadership — superintendents and their board members — have played in sustaining district commitment to racial/ethnic and socioeconomic integration over the years and what the nation might learn from the Morris district experience.

Local school administrators, board members and community advocates are an especially fascinating group to study on many levels within this integrated but demographically changing community where the continued threat of white flight often competes with doing what’s best for all children educated within the system.

Morris is a place where school desegregation has made impressive strides at the school and district levels, though the challenge of achieving true integration extending to courses and programs within each school remains.

One theme helps to explain how the Morris district has flourished for so long, while other district desegregation efforts have not — namely the actions taken by school administrators to further the idea that a successfully integrated district needs a supportive community and culturally sustaining leadership in the schools.

Substantial evidence emerged from our interviews that such conditions were essential to the Morris schools maintaining their diversity for as long as they have. We also found school leaders have had to walk a fine line between doing what is best for the general community and what is best for subgroups to keep them invested in the public schools.

Culturally Sustaining

As our research on the long-term effects of the merger unfolded, we kept asking ourselves, “What is it about the Morris district that has kept it together so long”? A former administrator we interviewed, who was highly supportive of our project, says he laughed when people said, “It is something in the water.” His story reflects the kind of culturally sustaining leadership and community partnerships needed to attract and maintain a delicate balance of diversity in the schools.

“I would say 30 percent of my energy, maybe more, went into caring for the community,” said Thomas Ficarra, who served as superintendent in Morris between 2002 and 2014. “I get a kick out of [the fact] some people tend to think it was something in the water, but I used to have three and sometimes four key communicators in my house where we would invite over 100 people to my house for dinner … and answer those phone calls when they came in and build those relationships and feed and care for every segment of that community as best we could, keeping an eye on the fact that at any moment in time it could all unravel. That was how I lived my life.”

The district’s middle school had been the point of exit for many students and their families. Dur-
Morris Superintendent: Where We Stand on Districtwide Integration Today

In his third year as superintendent of the Morris School District in Morris-town, N.J., Mackey Pendergrast, 52, says he is proud to be part of the district’s unique history of effective integration and is committed to maintaining it in a world where demographic trends bring steep challenges.

School Administrator talked with Pendergrast about the Morris district’s success story, which began with a state-ordered merger in 1971 and has continued ever since. The district’s history of integration is the basis of a recent report by the Center for Diversity and Equality in Education titled “Remedying School Segregation: How New Jersey’s Morris School District Chose to Make Diversity Work.”


How has the school district been able to maintain such a high level of diversity when so many other districts have been unable to do so?
PENDERGRAST: That’s the $64,000 question. I think a critical element is we have a board of education that embraces these core values and has partnered with school administrators, teachers and community leaders in making it happen in the most authentic way possible. ... This school district has had a highly engaged board committed to the highest-quality dialogue on this issue ... and it’s had that for a very long time.

From a strictly educational point of view, why is diversity important?
PENDERGRAST: Education is about preparation for life. ... For students who are living every single day in a diverse culture — an environment where they are living these lessons instead of merely learning about them — there is intrinsic value in that experience.

Today, more than ever before, we see that an understanding of different cultures is a critical component to being successful in life. ... Today it’s critical that students are globally competent, and it’s difficult to say that we are adequately preparing students to have global competency if they do not understand other perspectives and cultures.

Diversity in your student body has increased and that’s required constant managing. Talk about the challenges you face with an increasing number of students coming in from troubled Central American countries.
PENDERGRAST: We don’t want to use the word diversity unless we’re using the word inclusion along with it. We want to make sure all students are included in all the different types of learning that take place in a school system.

Certainly, immigration poses unique challenges to school systems. Many of these students are really refugees. These are families and students who are coming from extraordinarily difficult circumstances and they have tremendous needs.

We feel the goal is to have a healthy community. If you have a healthy community, community members, students, parents and teachers are working hard to understand and partner with each other for the success of the child. The healthy community has to come first, and then the other things are possible.

The recent report on your district’s unusual history says the Morris schools have remained largely under the national radar for decades. How do you feel about this attention?
PENDERGRAST: It’s been an opportunity for us to reassess our values and to reassess whether the people who started the Morris School District back in the 1970s would be proud of our actions today.

Are we fulfilling the vision they had 45 years ago? Would they be proud of where we are or would they want us to be further along?
ing Ficarra’s tenure, the white enrollment in the high school went from 50 percent to 62 percent. “There was white flight, and I’m not tooting my own horn, but I lived every day conscious that... every decision that was made was made knowing that I had a diverse community and I couldn’t swing radically left or radically right. I had to walk a fine line of how we promote the district and one of the things that I got a wonderful response about was we were one of the highest per-pupil costs around.

“I would stand up in front of the community when the budget came around and say our schools are a reflection of the community, we have kids that want to go to Harvard and we have kids that come in here where their parents do not speak English and we have to provide a quality program for every one of them at every level and that costs more money than it does at the community next door, and they would support that.”

When Ficarra’s tenure was over, he passed down a powerful tradition to the next superintendent, namely the importance of collaboration and involving all stakeholders in the school decision-making process. He also set a clear precedent about the importance of community support for the work of the school district.

A Stable Community

The first thing Ficarra’s successor as superintendent, Mackey Pendergrast, did was visit the NAACP, the local churches and other community organizations to spread his message and vision of integration and inclusion and to hear what others had to say about the district’s challenges, notably the persistent achievement gaps by race and class.

Pendergrast said he was attracted to the Morris superintendency by the fact a third of the students were economically disadvantaged. “I don’t want to go into a situation if I can’t do anything about it, so the community and the resources that are here and the intellectual commitment I discovered was here in the interview process, I thought we could do something with this. ... How many public schools are actually overcoming poverty gaps? How many? Not many.”

Stability in the community was a key factor. “When I interviewed, the board of ed here was so impressive and dedicated to each of the kids,” added Pendergrast, who has served as Morris superintendent since 2014. “You’ve got to have (support) from the board of ed all the way straight down through everybody, everybody really rooting and trying hard.”
In addition to building community support for the schools’ work, the district leadership in Morris also had the task of explaining that diversity in the student body means test scores are not comparable to the neighboring suburban system with a mostly white population.

A current member of the school board, Ann Rhines, who previously taught in the district, said many of the appealing programs, such as the STEM Academy, the Classics Academy, various music ensembles, the TV and radio broadcasting program and other enriching opportunities came about because of a concerted effort to reach every student.

“We aspire to succeed in fulfilling all student needs, to motivate each and every student, resulting in excitement about learning and to make each and every student feel that he or she is an integral member of the Morris School District community,” she said.

“Our problems come up when the scores come out,” Rhines added. “We don’t do what [the suburban district] does. We don’t get the scores that they get because everybody’s the same there. … We try to provide programs so that all kids can have all that they need to reach their potential and ultimately be prepared for the future. This is a challenge in a district as diverse as the Morris School District, but we feel up to that challenge.”

A dedicated, stable community that believes in diversity sustains successful and durable integration, which is something that attracts like-minded families to the community. Equally important is trusting and hoping the schools and community enable all children to reach their greatest potential, even when average test scores are lower than they are in predominantly white, upper-middle suburban districts. In fact, we found the district’s administrators have resisted testing metrics as the sole indicators of educational achievement. Instead, they take a whole-child approach to educating students.

What’s Been Learned
Today, 46 years later, the history of the Morris School District merger is, ironically, either unknown to or taken for granted by many residents living in Morristown and surrounding communities. New residents are drawn to the community because of its diversity and cosmopolitan nature, and current graduates value the experience they have had in attending a diverse public high school — both attributable to the 1971 merger.

Long-time residents who lived through the merger regard it as one of the most important things ever to happen to the community because it symbolizes the belief that “we are all in this together.”

An important lesson to be learned from the Morris example is the need for more multiethnic schools to help combat racism, ethnocentrism and intolerance, particularly in this period of racial unrest and political divisiveness.

Decades of social science literature suggest integrated school environments can close achievement and opportunity gaps in education; students of color benefit substantially, mostly in the early grades; white students are not harmed academically; and all students learn tolerance and intergroup understanding.

In our dealings with the Morris district leadership, we have urged them to do more to attend to social justice concerns. Education leaders should train staff members in racial and cultural literacies to work with diverse student populations to maximize their learning.

An important lesson from the experiences in Morris is that you need culturally sustaining leadership and buy-in from the community to succeed. Certainly, the structures need to be in place to maintain school diversity. Achieving racial balance, however, does not guarantee positive short- and long-term outcomes.

You also need the hearts and minds of school staff and community members to support the hard work that integration requires for diversity to be addressed effectively. Morris has been and continues to be on the path to achieve both goals and become a positive model for other school districts committed to school diversity’s many transformational benefits.

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Additional Resource

The report, written by Paul Tractenberg, Allison Roda and Ryan Coughlan and issued last December by the Century Foundation, showcases a distinctive New Jersey school district that acted to prevent school inequities and took decisive legal action to make student diversity work in the public schools.
When I arrived as superintendent for the Columbia, Mo., Public Schools in 2009, I was glad to hear the district had what the school board considered a great Advanced Placement program. The two large high schools, each with 2,000-plus students, offered more than 20 AP courses, and a remarkable 82 percent of participating students had passed their corresponding AP tests.

During tours of the schools, though, I noticed a lack of diversity in AP classes, especially compared to our student population, which was 32 percent non-white. Upon further research, I learned few low-income students participated in Advanced Placement courses.

Because the rigor of a student’s high school curriculum is a key factor both in college admissions and in completion of a college degree, a truly great AP program would be one that maintained high achievement and ensured students of all race and income groups participate at the same rate as their peers. That’s what I wanted for students.

A Problematic Pattern
The enrollment pattern greatly troubled and challenged me. I had to face the fact that many students of color or from low-income homes had dreams of college, a decent-paying job that allowed them to support a family and a bright future, but too many of these students were not getting access to the curriculum that best prepared them to enroll in and complete college.

Statistics proved illuminating. Two compelling facts made clear the goal and the problem:

- College graduates’ earning power is at least two-times greater than students with a high school diploma. It is a lifetime of difference.

- Fully 99 percent of diverse high schools with established AP programs have course enrollments that seriously underrepresent students from low-income families and students of color, according to research by Equal Opportunity Schools and The Education Trust.

I recognized our practices were limiting access to AP courses for some students based on adult beliefs and traditional institutional barriers.

I deemed the situation required urgent attention. Thus began a journey to build commitment to equity and structures that identify, recruit and support “missing” children, those who were underrepresented in challenging classes. My audacious goals were to change the
sense of what’s possible and break the cycle of low expectations of teachers, students and parents. It involved reframing the struggle, demystifying what great AP teaching looked like and developing a safe place for dissent and discussion upon the difficult topics of race and oppression.

Fortunately, we had excellent AP teachers.

Moving Into Action
My district’s leadership team met with the high school principals and agreed we needed to address the AP participation gap. Our first attempt involved a book study of Carol Dweck’s *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* combined with some contracted equity training for the administrative team. We felt positive about our efforts but did not see substantial changes in access to or enrollment in AP courses the following school year.

How many times have we as administrators grown frustrated talking about specific tasks and projects without seeing change for students — especially our most underserved students? I asked myself, “What would it mean if we committed to transforming access now for students who are chronically underrepresented in AP?”

I knew I had to take a stronger stand when I learned other superintendents around the country had closed their AP participation gaps in a single year. Wenatchee Public Schools in Washington closed access gaps to their schools’ AP courses during a single year and saw an increase in pass rates. Similarly, Corona-Norco Unified School District in Norco, Calif., had created equal access to AP courses across their six high schools and maintained their passing rates.

These cases suggested that Columbia’s low-income students and students of color who were missing from AP would be capable of the advanced work if we just gave them a fair shot. Could Jaime Escalante’s idea that “students will rise to the level of expectations” stand up in contradiction to the pervasive sense in so many of our schools that black and brown students are — by the time they get to high school — less capable

Chris Belcher, former superintendent in Columbia, Mo., with members of his student advisory council at Battle High School.
of academic excellence? I believed this to be true and set off to find resources to help address our equity access gap. The school district applied to partner with Equal Opportunity Schools, a nonprofit firm in Seattle, Wash., dedicated to ensuring all students have equal access to the most academically intense high school programs to tackle the participation gap. EOS had won a recent Google Global Impact Award to offer match-funded partnerships in new school districts. They are national experts in finding “missing students” and enabling leaders to achieve equitable access in advanced academic programs. We were selected as a match-funded

David F. Larson, superintendent of the Glenbard Township High School District 87 in suburban Chicago, offers suggestions for education leaders for pursuing equity in high-level instruction. In his district, 44 percent of all high school seniors will have taken at least one AP course by the time they graduate. Notably, course participation disaggregated by subgroup shows the number of low-income Latino students doubled between 2015-16 and 2017-18 and tripled for low-income African American students during the same time frame. Enrollment in AP classes by low-income white and Asian students in Glenbard Township almost doubled. These are Larson’s seven ideas for closing the gap in AP course taking.

- **No. 1:** Spend time with your principals and key teacher leaders at the outset to discuss your beliefs about which students can take AP courses. All of our schools have an unwritten understanding of which students are good candidates for AP courses, and some of these preconceptions need to be eliminated at the start.

- **No. 2:** Communicate a clear implementation timeline at the outset. The Equal Opportunity Schools toolkit works, but it can be very disruptive if staff do not feel like they know when each step in the work is scheduled to take place.

- **No. 3:** Be wary of suggestions to remove entire categories of students from your outreach lists (English language learners, students with disabilities, students with disciplinary records, students falling below a high GPA cutoff). If you do this, you will miss students with the assets to succeed.

- **No. 4:** Train your trusted adults — those with charisma who have the closest relationships with students — before dispatching them to engage students in recruitment conversations. These teachers and counselors are your biggest lever in showing students they have the capacity to succeed. It is important these conversations be well planned so they are welcoming and encouraging interaction.

- **No. 5:** Do not be surprised when students with the assets to succeed are initially reticent to commit. Politely refuse to accept their first “no” — just like the basketball coach recruiting the tall freshman unsure about playing. Schedule a second round of outreach and recruitment as you begin the first round under the assumption some students will need multiple contacts before they commit.

- **No. 6:** Provide targeted professional development to support the shift in mindset you are asking teachers to make.

- **No. 7:** After you launch your supports, don’t just let them run. Instead, scrutinize, systematize and normalize them so they are effective.

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Students in the Advanced Placement environmental science course at Glenbard North High School in Carol Stream, Ill., with teacher Deborah Karavites-Uhl (center).
partner district and developed an action plan for the next school year.

**Nearly Derailed**
The work was rife with challenges. Some teachers and other staff felt we were moving too fast and that some students we had identified as capable of taking an AP class would fail or were not ready for the rigor of the various AP courses. Others suggested we would be lowering the pace and intensity of the AP courses. There was even concern expressed about harming a student’s GPA and college scholarship opportunities.

Furthermore, I was hearing that a lot of the missing students we had identified (through detailed surveys, academic record analysis and teacher recommendations) did not want to sign up for AP. This almost derailed the infrastructure work my team implemented as outlined in our action plan. At this point, I wondered if the students felt unwelcomed and afraid. I also wondered how the adults were interacting with the students during the recruitment discussions. Frustration was setting in.

I met alone with our designated partnership director from Equal Opportunity Schools, and she shared this was a common barrier that other schools experienced. She suggested we pivot the message slightly and involve other trusted adults in the school to engage with the students.

I sent a district staff member who had a trusted working relationship with underrepresented students to re-engage with those who had declined to enroll in AP. This almost derailed the infrastructure work my team implemented as outlined in our action plan. At this point, I wondered if the students felt unwelcomed and afraid. I also wondered how the adults were interacting with the students during the recruitment discussions. Frustration was setting in.

I met alone with our designated partnership director from Equal Opportunity Schools, and she shared this was a common barrier that other schools experienced. She suggested we pivot the message slightly and involve other trusted adults in the school to engage with the students.

I sent a district staff member who had a trusted working relationship with underrepresented students to re-engage with those who had previously declined to say they would enroll in AP. The staff member succeeded in getting 90 percent of the students who had previously declined to say they would enroll in an AP class. It was about coming back to students, bringing new messaging and ideas, inspiring them to step up and challenge themselves, while we showed belief in their abilities.

Through this re-engagement, we learned some students were anxious and felt they did not belong in AP courses. Others just needed additional encouragement and deeper discussions before they felt comfortable enough to enroll.

During the partnership, we found that 90 percent of our students — of every race and income group — wanted to go to college. We found many did not achieve their goal of graduating high school because low-income students and students of color were seldom challenged by rigor in their classes. In fact, nationally, only a paltry 15 percent of the low-income students and students of color who are not in AP classes report being challenged by their high school classes.

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**Once Discovered, Underrepresented Students Have Much to Share**

In the Equal Opportunity Schools’ program to close the equity gap in advanced course taking in high school, students are surveyed about their experiences.

The comments below, by students of color and low-income students, address their experiences in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

- **A High School Student in Everett, Wash.:** “I think AP classes are such a great experience ... [Y]ou learn to use your time wisely, you learn ... self-discipline and most of all you learn to push yourself to your limits and actually learn your limits.”

- **A Senior at Glenbard South High School in Glenbard Township, Ill.:** “… Upperclassmen … said there was loads of homework and it was impossible to get a grade above a B. These descriptions and their attitudes toward the class intimidated me. Once I began taking the class, I was overwhelmed ... but soon I began managing my time so that I got the homework or projects done on time.”

- **A Student at Capitol Hill High School in Oklahoma City, Okla.:** “Before I started AP, I never imagined myself being in an AP class. I worried about not being smart enough to be in an AP class. ... After I got comfortable with being in the class and talking to the other students I realized that most of them are experiencing the same thing as I am.”

  — Chris Belcher

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We spend so much time talking about what students — especially underserved students — could not do, and far too little time creating the opportunities for them to prove us wrong.

**Breakthrough Moment**

My partnership director with Equal Opportunity Schools discussed the breakthrough that can occur when student diversity is reflected at the highest levels of K-12 schooling.

At a summer conference, students of color and those from low-income families shared stinging comments and a sense of self-doubt about whether they “belonged” in AP based on negative feedback from staff and the unwelcoming culture of an all-white AP classroom. A student vividly recalled that a counselor believed they might not be able to handle AP. Another student told how uncomfortable it felt to walk into an AP classroom and find no one looked like them: Classmates and the teachers acted as if they were in the wrong place.

I have seen so much data through current literature and news coverage, training sessions and peer discussions that I knew more than enough
to believe in “missing” students’ ability to succeed — if we as educators eliminated barriers and provided systematic encouragement.

Ultimately, following some conflict, we closed the racial access gaps to AP courses in a single year. We had to allay the concerns of those AP teachers who feared the pass rate would drop and some counselors who questioned the readiness of students for the rigorous AP curriculum. We also knew some recruited students were worried about the impact on their GPA.

As a result, we added mandatory, ongoing academic support. Overall, we had an increase of 238 low-income students and students of color enroll in AP, quadrupling the number of low-income African-Americans in the courses.

In the end, the teachers gave strong support to the first-time AP students and the students performed comparably to their peers. One principal said: “In the end, it was mostly about changing adult mindsets. I felt confident once students overcame their own doubts and the teachers showed an unwavering belief in them, the ultimate result would be transformational. I was not disappointed. When we challenged students at the highest level and supported them with great teaching, they met our expectations.”

The prior year’s passage rate — defined as scoring a three or higher on the AP exam at course end — of 82 percent remained statistically unchanged despite the wider enrollment.

Academic intervention time was provided for all students, with recruited AP students being assigned intervention time with an AP teacher. Organizational and study skills strategies and connection with an adult mentor were used to assist the student in achieving and maintaining early success. Additionally, none of the recruited students were allowed to drop the AP class without meeting with the principal to talk through their struggles. The principal sought to remedy the concern, provided motivation and encouragement and reinforced the value of taking rigorous coursework.

Several AP teachers who had been vocally opposed to this strategy stopped by my office once the test results were posted and thanked me for pushing this initiative forward, challenging their mindset. They described how their perception of high expectations for students had changed.

**Personal Meaning**

It would be hard to overstate what this work meant. Personally, it was one of the most meaningful academic experiences of my career.

I’ve continued this work over the past three years as the superintendent-in-residence for Equal Opportunity Schools, the same organization that opened my eyes to the impact of full-gap closure in classroom equity on students and administrators. I appreciate now more than ever the challenge of achieving equity at the highest levels. EOS and The Education Trust have discovered 640,000 missing students each year in our country, stuck literally across the high school hallway from the education they need and deserve.

I have observed an incredible commitment to equity in colleagues nationwide. School, district and state education leaders have found nearly 50,000 missing students and advocated for those students until they had access to their schools’ most rigorous courses. In 75 percent of schools, the success rate on the college-level AP tests has remained stable or increased — showing that this work is not about solving an achievement gap that lives in our students. It’s about our leadership and willingness to close the opportunity gap — a gap as close as the nearest high school and only as wide as its hallway.

Education leaders can make this choice at any time. But for our current 11th-grade students, any later than this year would be too late.

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**Additional Resources**

Equal Opportunity Schools is a nonprofit organization based in Seattle, Wash., that works with schools, districts and states to close enrollment gaps among students in their Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. The organization works with education leaders to locate their “missing students” so that AP and IB programs fully reflect the student body in those schools. EOS has worked with 450 individual schools, 152 school districts in 27 states. Further details are at [http://eoschools.org](http://eoschools.org).
What does leadership for equity and instruction look like? The New Jersey Network of Superintendents, launched in 2008 and supported by the Panasonic Foundation, has explored this question in monthly meetings for the past nine years. Those meetings have focused explicitly on developing superintendents’ capabilities as leaders of instruction and equity.

At first, the meetings centered on instructional rounds in participating districts, with the expectation that those classroom observations would surface issues of equity. But it was often difficult to compare the learning experiences of students from different backgrounds and in different levels or tracks, and the professionals’ conversations shied away from the sensitive topics and potential conflicts that discussions of equity and race often involve.

Those experiences made it clear that a focus on instruction had to be accompanied by an explicit focus on equity. As a result, the monthly meetings now include work on specific, high-leverage equity goals in each school district, an adaptation of instructional rounds called “equity visits” and attention to the specific needs and opportunities of diverse and rapidly changing populations in each district.

High-Leverage Goals
The basic structure and organization of schools in the United States limit rigorous learning opportunities for many students, particularly students of color and students living in poverty. But reducing the disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic students who are suspended or placed in special education and increasing the numbers of these students who are in higher-level classes are examples of the high-leverage equity goals that school district leaders can pursue.

The New Jersey network defines high-leverage equity goals as goals that:

► focus explicitly on the achievement of high-level learning outcomes for all students;
► provide opportunities for visible and measurable improvements in relatively short periods of time; and
► establish a foundation for further systemic improvements across a district.

For instance, the leaders of the Freehold Regional High School District in Monmouth County, N.J., created the Freehold Regional Opportunity Index, which shows the extent to which students from different backgrounds are underrepresented or overrepresented in particular categories, such as enrollment in AP classes and in specialized magnet programs.

When the index highlighted the fact that special education students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students and African-American and Hispanic students often “decelerated” in mathematics classes, moving from higher-level courses in 9th grade to lower-level courses in 10th and 11th grades, the district made it a high-leverage equity goal to reverse this deceleration and increase access to higher-level math classes.
The Freehold leadership recognized what concrete steps they could take to produce relatively quick results, including eliminating the lowest-level math classes and increasing the amount of math support for the lowest-performing students in 9th grade. These initial steps helped guide them as they expanded this approach to science and other subjects.

In Passaic, N.J., a largely Hispanic, low-income district, district administrators focused on a different but common problem: Graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education were required to take remedial courses, which increased the cost and time of attaining a two-year or four-year degree and raised the likelihood of them dropping out of college.

In response, the district established a high-leverage equity goal of ensuring all students have the chance to graduate with at least 15 college credits and/or a career certification. The Passaic leaders identified specific steps to generate an immediate return.

Those steps focused on the College Board’s Accuplacer test, which many higher education institutions use to determine which students need remedial education. When students go to a university or community college, however, many have never heard of the Accuplacer.

“They have no idea about the content and they have no preparation to take it,” Passaic’s assistant superintendent, Rachel Goldberg, says, “so what we’re doing is trying to change that game by viewing the Accuplacer as a key gateway to college.”

In 2015-16, the district began administering the Accuplacer to all high school juniors and seniors. The initiative enabled the district to do two things:

▸ identify students who are already eligible to enroll in courses that offer college credit, which provides the “quick win” that can build momentum for further gains; and

▸ design after-school and summer school programs for students identified as needing extra support.

Passaic also is expanding opportunities for SAT preparation and Advanced Placement courses so all students are better prepared to apply to college and complete a four-year college track.

Quality for All

In addition to access to higher-level coursework, all students need access to powerful instruction to succeed. To help the superintendents and their districts sharpen their focus on both instruction and equity, the New Jersey network members engage in “equity visits” every other month during the academic year in which they may visit a participating superintendent’s district.

The superintendents’ daylong visits feature small-group classroom observations, as they did in the past. However, observers now also consider disaggregated data on student performance, data on suspensions, assignment to special education, student access to higher-level courses and other indicators related to equity.

Observations often are accompanied by activities such as interviews with students and teachers and discussions of student work. These make it easier to identify discrepancies and inequities in instruction. The network members also use routines and protocols such as consultancies and fishbowls to surface areas of conflict, ambiguity and superficial understanding in their own discussions.

The discussions involving network participants provide the host school district with key issues to pursue in developing their next levels of work on equity and instruction. At the same time, the visiting superintendents gain new ideas and formulate new questions to ask in their own districts that can advance their work.

Diversity in Diversity

The districts involved in the network share common problems, such as how to increase student access to higher-level learning opportunities. Yet differences in the specific racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and families in each school district create quite different conditions for each district’s work on equity.

In one suburban district, fewer
than 2 percent of the residents in 1970 were African American. By 2000, the African-American population comprised more than 30 percent as middle- and upper-income African-American families moved into the district. Now, the percentage of African-American families is decreasing as more Hispanic and Asian families move into the area.

In another high-income district, the increasing numbers of families moving to the U.S. from East Asia has fueled a substantial population increase as well as a much more diverse population. By 2011-12, the student population in the senior class was 60 percent white and the kindergarten class was 60 percent Asian, and by 2013-14, the population of Asian students in the district as a whole had grown to about 60 percent.

A middle-income district that had a largely white population before 2000 has grown much more diverse, as families have arrived from India, China and Mexico. From the perspective of the administrators in that district, the change happened almost overnight. The transformation has continued such that all the schools in the district now have almost equal percentages of white, African-American, Asian and Hispanic students.

Within these districts, gaps in learning opportunities and performance have emerged between white and African-American students from families with relatively high incomes; between high-performing Asian students and high-performing white, African-American and Hispanic students; and between immigrant students from East Asia and immigrant students from Mexico.

In short, the diversity of the population and the speed of population change in each district contribute to unique conditions that education leaders must learn to navigate. That navigation has to take into account the racial and cultural backgrounds of all members of the community, the specific character of the equity issues that are emerging, the extent to which those issues are recognized by the community and the extent to which those issues already are being examined in opposing or collaborative ways.

The network meetings create opportunities for superintendents to describe and compare their work on equity, reflecting particularly on how to adapt to the needs of their communities.

Pressure and Support
Education leaders should not be left to work on issues of equity on their own. They can benefit from support and engagement in collegial groups, such as the New Jersey Network of Superintendents. By working together, leaders gain access to relevant information, resources and expertise and to the intellectual, emotional and moral support that can help sustain a focus on fundamental questions of equity and instruction.

As one superintendent declared, the network provides both “pressure and support” by inspiring the members to focus on equity and by expecting them to report back on what they are doing. “What have I done since the last meeting to further the work?” another says. “That’s where the guilt emerges, but it does give hope.”

In the end, the work of the network members demonstrates the essential contributions that individual education leaders make to the fight for equity in their school communities. At the same time, the experiences of the network members demonstrate that issues of equity are not just local issues; equity issues cut across all communities.

Progress demands collective leadership that brings together those inside and outside schools in a common commitment to address the social, cultural, economic and political issues that transcend district boundaries.

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Combating Hatred Among Us

The pressing need today for sustained reflection by educators on our core values as a democratic society

BY TERRANCE L. FURIN

The headlines in a local newspaper screamed the news that a racially and ethnically diverse school district of 7,000 students was “in crisis” after racially charged text messages between the superintendent and the district’s athletic director had surfaced.

The revelation in fall 2013 shook the Pennsylvania school district and its community to the core, and aftershocks continue to this day. It involved a highly regarded educator who had led the district’s varsity football team to fame prior to becoming high school principal and then superintendent.

This is a limited sampling of the text messages (note the “n” word was spelled out in the original texts) traded between the two:

Athletic Director (AD) to Superintendent (Supt):
“All should just have whatever first names they want ... then last name is N----r! Leroy N----r, Preacher N----r, Night train n----r, Clarence n----r, Latoya n----r, Thelma n----r and so on.”

Supt to AD: “Great idea! Joe n----r bill n----r snake n----r got a nice ring to it.”

AD to Supt: “LMAO!” (Laugh my ass off)

Supt to AD: “hahahah ... could have whole home-rooms of N----r! hahahahahahahaha! Will N----r report to office, pardon the interruption but will N----r report to nurses office. N----r to lunch now!”

Supt to AD (referring to pending teacher layoffs): “23 get clipped Tuesday ...”

AD to Supt: “How many n----rs out of 23? Not enough!”

Supt to AD: “Don’t know but think it’s only 4-5.”

AD to Supt: “Good hangings there!”

The ongoing exchange contained sexually explicit remarks regarding interracial sex acts as well as offensive racial, ethnic and sexual comments against blacks, Jews, Arabs and women and continued over several days. The texts were especially remarkable because of the school district’s diverse student body, which is approximately 49 percent white, 36 percent black, 12 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian.
Continuing Fallout
The school district’s technology director (a Lebanese-American referred to in one of the texts as a “camel jockey”) uncovered the texts as he was erasing data from the athletic director’s district-issued cell phone. He reported the content of the text messages to a district administrator, who in turn shared them with a school board member.

When members of the school board met with the superintendent, he admitted to sending and receiving the texts and subsequently informed the board he was retiring. The athletic director followed suit.

When local news media acted on tips regarding the text messages and the administrators’ resignations, community members made it clear through multiple public marches and raucous school board meetings that they wanted the men fired outright. Ultimately, the board accepted the resignations, citing potential legal problems if the men were fired. This action enabled the two to keep their state pensions, which infuriated the community. The entire matter resulted in board members’ resignations and a new board being seated after the next election.

Fallout from the incident continues, and the district’s reputation has suffered. The text messages were used as the basis for an employment discrimination lawsuit by a former district employee. The superintendent was charged with several offenses, including theft for using district funds to pay for championship rings for the football team with the matter expected to go to trial this fall.

Varying Reactions
Reactions from educators to the text messages have been varied as was evident when I led roundtable sessions at a statewide conference of superintendents in April 2016 and at AASAs 2017 National Conference on Education.
Most superintendents interviewed at these two forums expressed shock or disbelief at the hateful messages. Others, however, indicated the texts should be viewed as little more than casual locker-room banter. One superintendent contended that, had the administrators used their private phones rather than district-issued cell phones, the appropriateness of the messages would not have been questioned.

A participant who teaches prospective superintendents at a university located near the Pennsylvania district said a distinction should be made between a person’s personality (surface persona) and character (internally held core beliefs). Another superintendent commented that if personality and character are not in sync, the outer façade will eventually disappear and reveal the true internal self, which can lead to a person’s moral collapse that jeopardizes the integrity of the district’s professed values.

In this case, the district’s mission statement specified it was a “learning community rich in diversity and committed to excellence by providing rigorous educational opportunities … [for] lifelong learners in a global society.” The parent/student handbook included a civil rights statement that read, in part, that the district “is an equal opportunity education institution and will not discriminate on the basis of age, race, color [or] national origin.”

The racist texts revealed the superintendent’s internal core beliefs lacked integrity and did not ring true with the professed district values. Hundreds of angry protesters recognized this and were outraged at his deceit.

When superintendents at the roundtable sessions were asked whether they thought the core values exposed in the racist texts were uncommon, most said they were aware of other school leaders holding similar views.

Communal Values
If the views of the Pennsylvania superintendent and athletic director are not unusual, how do district leaders counter such attitudes? School system leaders must become transformational leaders to achieve greater cultural competence for the entire district.

To build dialogue on communal values, a superintendent from the Midwest shared his success using BaFá BaFá, a training simulation designed to increase cultural awareness by helping people understand the impact of culture on the behavior of individuals and organizations and recognize the value of diversity.
This district’s administrators and some faculty members completed substantive BaFá BaFá training. The program is expanding throughout the learning community to continue building positive communal values.

This account brought back memories of my own superintendency in the early 1990s. In my first month on the job, I faced angry parents, students and residents who were infuriated over an ACLU-led injunction against Christian prayer at commencement. The valedictorian was a young Jewish woman whose family initiated the injunction.

The fury intensified after I led the school board in instituting a policy against prayer at all school events. I was called the anti-Christ and was stalked. I had my trash stolen and received numerous threats. It did not subside until I opened an FBI file, held extensive meetings with community groups, began writing a column on tolerance for the local newspaper and eventually brought together a school board badly split when half were defeated in the next election by a coalition led by a national right-wing organization.

This crisis over school prayer led to teacher in-service programs on human rights and a revamping of the curriculum to emphasize communal values. During my 11 years as superintendent, there were many other human rights issues. For these we were better prepared. One was the threat of neo-Nazis who wanted a school boycott on Heinrich Himmler’s “death day” (see “Confronting a Neo-Nazi Hate Group” in The School Administrator, November 2007). Teachers led the community in standing up to this threat by saying “No neo-Nazis here!”

A meaningful way superintendents can promote development of common values and cultural competence is by leading faculty and staff to reflect on core values. This activity can be prompted in reaction to public displays of intolerance, such as the desecration of Jewish cemeteries or calls for Muslim citizens to leave the country or the public rallies of white supremacists and neo-Nazis. Others can build community bonding through common readings of works that emphasize struggles that depict youth dealing with racial stress in many of America’s neighborhoods. Two such books are M.K. Asante’s Buck and Frank Meeink’s Autobiography of a Recovering Skinhead.

Had the superintendent and athletic director of the suburban Philadelphia district reflected at all on the social justice aspects of such documents as the Declaration of Independence or the Bill of Rights, accepted them as part of their core values and used them to guide their actions, they might never have engaged in the offensive and hurtful text messaging.

**Professional Duty**

Professional organizations such as AASA and its state affiliates have a responsibility for promoting the ethical standards professed by these organizations. AASAs professional code of ethics, adopted in March 2007, states in part, “An educational leader’s professional conduct must conform to an ethical code of behavior, and the code must set high standards for all educational leaders.”

National standards, high-stakes testing and data analyses tend to dominate the professional development agendas for state and national education organizations. Given the divisive political climate shown by the Charlottesville catastrophe and other hate-filled events around the country, our profession needs to pay more serious attention to developing deeper understanding of ethics related to cultural diversity.

Superintendents who hope to be considered as transformational must stand tall and reflect continuously on their core values. They need to lead their districts in examining communal values of equity and social justice. We cannot allow the racial, ethnic and religious hatred that divides this nation to stifle the very breath of our democracy.

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### Additional Resources

The author recommends these informational sources for teaching about cultural diversity and dealing with conflicts related to cultural diversity.

- **ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE** provides anti-bias curricula, resources and customized, interactive training programs for educators, [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)
- **BAFÁ BAFÁ** offers a simulation to teach educators and students about cultural diversity, [https://youthandaction.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/history-of-bafa-bafa-a-cross-culturaldiversityinclusion-simulation](https://youthandaction.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/history-of-bafa-bafa-a-cross-culturaldiversityinclusion-simulation)
- **COUNCIL ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS** offers a series of guides to explain relevant Muslim religious practices to educators, [www.caic.com](http://www.caic.com)
- **PENNSYLVANIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION** educates educators and students on civil rights, [www.phrc.pa.gov](http://www.phrc.pa.gov)
- **SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER** provides Teaching Tolerance’s educational kits and free subscriptions to its magazine for educators, [www.tplcenter.org](http://www.tplcenter.org)
- **UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL** offers publications and multimedia resources supporting general human rights education, [www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/TrainingEducation.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/TrainingEducation.aspx)
Mr. M was a highly regarded, long-time principal in the Midwest whose support of an ill-conceived event intended to improve cultural understanding ended with his forced retirement and his reputation damaged.

Dr. K., a new superintendent in another community, was committed to social justice, including high expectations for all students. But before her vision could be realized, the community and board of education turned on her, and she was forced to resign.

Both scenarios, which took place within the past six years, involve white education leaders serving predominantly white communities undergoing demographic changes. Both involve leaders with big hearts, and both situations contain important lessons about the blind spots that leaders with a lifetime of white privilege may face when introducing efforts to build cultural understanding and equity.

As a former superintendent who emerged from the fog of white privilege to become an activist for social justice, I know now that getting equity right matters. Efforts gone awry stir up controversy. Communities can be left in emotional tatters. Initiatives to change attitudes and ways of doing business in diverse school settings grind to a halt.

A Misguided Initiative

Mr. M. was the principal of an elementary school in a suburban district that had no black students or faculty. While his school continued to draw students from an affluent part of town, other schools were undergoing demographic changes as families from a nearby city relocated.

His teachers wanted to help their students be culturally sensitive to these newcomers — mostly black and brown students. With his support, they planned a “slave day” to “help students understand what it was like to be a slave.” Students, for example,
could “sleep” in a space the size of what an enslaved child slept in.

The black community who resided in the district was outraged. The white community was perplexed by the reaction to their efforts to teach multicultural understanding. In response, the teachers swore they would never do anything again to help students understand others. Instead of fostering better understanding, the event sparked heated discussions, community distrust and cultural division. Under the pressure, Mr. M. retired.

What went wrong? The planners of this event, all white teachers, took a story that belonged to others and told it without permission and without consultation. A leader versed in cultural sensitivity could avoid such controversy by moving the teachers to the next level of cultural understanding. That would mean asking the event planners to consider:

> the difference between the terms 
> *slavery* and *enslavement*;

> why the story of enslavement is not theirs to tell;

> why the story of enslavement is not the ONLY story that could be told about the black community;

> the difference between learning *about* others and learning *from* them;

> ways to amplify the voices of the owners of the story; and

> the difference between working *for* a marginalized group versus working *with* them.

The kind of conversations members of a community have reflects and shapes the values and culture of that community. By changing the conversation to one deliberately focused on equity, leaders change the culture.

**Reduced Expectations**

Dr. K. was the superintendent of a community of about 60,000 residents, which was undergoing demographic change. New families increasingly included students who identified as black or brown or were part of families challenged by poverty or spoke languages other than English at home. An insightful student of data, the superintendent discovered her district’s academic performance looked good in the aggregate, but this masked the reality that some student groups were not being served by the learning and teaching practices in place.

Simply put, many teachers and community members had lower expectations for newcomers. Programming and practices reflected this bias.

Dr. K. operated on the belief all students possess the intelligence to benefit from a rigorous curriculum as long as the schools provide the resources and support they need. Neither the teachers nor the community shared this belief. The school district had a long history of tracking students by ability. Those in-the-know rallied to have their children labeled gifted as early as possible. Advanced courses were reserved for those who met preordained academic and behavioral standards.

The community was not prepared to accept what they saw as a complete shift in how school operations were “always done.” They particularly feared that changes to ensure all students thrived would divert financial and staffing resources from the programs they loved and expected. They did not buy into the notion these programs were exclusive and benefited those students who already had many benefits. And they certainly did not want to have their children sharing classrooms with “those students.”

Through her work as a local school leader, Dr. K. had encountered the “crime of squandered potential,” a concept described in a 2012 book I co-authored with Yvette Jackson, *Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban Schools through Fearless Leadership*. The so-called crime exists in the way learning and teaching were institutionalized in the district to serve effectively only a portion of the student population.

The superintendent, who was in her ninth year of leading the district, moved quickly to implement her vision, a completely understandable impulse. Unfortunately, the community was not prepared. She lost her job, and the students to whom she was dedicated remain in academically anemic courses. They still suffer the “spirit slashing” (a point I describe more fully in my new book *We Must Say No to the Status Quo: Educators as Allies in the Battle for Social Justice*) that often accompanies school policies and practices that do not value students from other cultures, their experiences or their world-view.

**Five Prerequisites**

The prerequisites to successfully address equity issues at the district and school leadership levels are these:

> **ASSESS THE CURRENT REALITY.** Ask what are the possibilities and limitations of taking on this issue, at this time, with this group of people. By articulating the possibilities, a leader will bolster the motivation needed to engage in promoting change in prac-
tices and policies. By articulating the limitations, a leader will have a clearer vision of where opposition may arise and what form it may take.

► STUDY THE HISTORY CAREFULLY. Faced with systemic change, community members often fall back on the trope “We always did it this way” — despite the truth. Knowing when, how and why a highly prized way of doing things was instituted is often enough to push back against change resisters.

► BUILD CONSENSUS. Your agenda may be to eliminate tracking and gifted programs, but announcing this at the outset could kick up a firestorm of protest. Instead, craft a vision statement on easily accepted, laudable principles that lead to the change you are seeking. Who is inclined to argue against a vision that speaks to all students achieving their potential or all students thriving? Prepare for ensuring steps by cultivating a relationship with those likely to oppose your ultimate goal.

► CRAFT AND EMPLOY A REVIEW PROCESS. With an agreed-upon vision in place, you can filter current and proposed new policies and practices through a robust process to assess their alignment with the vision. Using a 1-10 scale is helpful. Asking a group of community members, faculty or students to consider the merits of a long-standing practice — such as a spelling bee — would lead to some lively conversation. To what extent does conducting yearly spelling bees help all students meet their potential? (1 = not at all; 10 = very much). If the consensus is that spelling bees do not help all students achieve their potential, then the conversation could shift to what can or should be done about this.

► EXPECT FLARE-UPS. Having a clear vision and process offers some cover while pushing system change. So, too, does having a large and representative group involved in assessing policies and practices against stated criteria. Yet no process will totally prevent disagreements and backlash.

**Blunt Reaction**

As education leaders, we can promote collaboration and a spirit of inquiry. We can construct a shared sense of community and a consistent, agreed upon and productive way of addressing issues. Nowhere is this more important — or more fraught with dangers — than in addressing changing student body demographics, what we refer to as diversity. The truth is that diversity and the actions taken to address diversity — such as culturally responsive teaching, multiculturalism and cultural competency — fail to bring to the surface the real issue.

As described by Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell in an *Educational Leadership* article “Equity Literacy for All,” one student, who identifies as black and was involved in a two-year multicultural initiative to address diversity in the school, sized up the project bluntly. She told the researchers the multicultural campaign did “nothing.” She wanted to know when the school would address the real issue: racism.

We can learn much from this student and from Mr. M. and Dr. K. Promoting cultural understanding in public education involves hard work, consensus building and honesty. It means recognizing that schools are grounded in multiple cultures that often do not see situations through the same lens. It requires recognizing that underlying issues may be fraught with biased overtones, if not outright hostility. It means realizing different timelines and priorities exist among stakeholders.

**A Delicate Enterprise**

Fostering cultural understanding and equity is a delicate enterprise. Educators typically possess three strengths that, if identified and intentionally cultivated, help them be successful in dramatically altering the lives of their most vulnerable students.

These strengths include:

► DISPOSITION. Educators often have big hearts. Educators want to make the world a better place.

► PREPARATION. Educators are strategic. Educators develop lessons, policies and practices with an intended outcome in mind to which they align activities.

► POSITION. Educators possess access and influence. Educators come in contact with every student in their school. Educators possess institutional power that they can harness to work with others as opposed to over others.

There is no scope and sequence to equity work. Different contexts demand different responses. However, educators can trust their three strengths to aid them in their efforts to become strategic allies in the quest for justice and cultural understanding.

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Loving Diversity in Public Education

IN JULY, I HAD the privilege of attending the Canadian Association of School System Administrators conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The theme was Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities, Healthy Future and, as expected, presenters addressed such topics as suicide prevention and how to embed wellness goals into strategic plans.

One topic in particular that resonated with me was the importance of respecting every child regardless of his or her native language, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, place of residence or any other factor used to label and sort students in our schools.

Several CASSA conference sessions shared school-based programs that honor students’ heritage and acknowledge the contributions and struggles of ethnic groups. They spoke to me of building in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage and encouraging and celebrating all people coming together to build a stronger community and country.

In fact, the conference opened with a program about the power of words, and I was taken by the use of the term First Nations in referring to Native American tribes living in Canada. How respectful to acknowledge these indigenous people living in Canada as the First Nation!

In our schools, working to build an understanding and appreciation of others, then celebrating the gifts and contributions each of us brings to our community of learners is a formula for success. We need to celebrate the diversity we have in our schools and celebrate the understanding that relationships and respect are critical to appreciating the uniqueness and the commonalities our students represent in our diverse school populations.

That appreciation for and desire to be inclusive applies not only to students within a learning community, but also to the workforce within our schools. A 2016 report by the U.S. Department of Education, “The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce” cited statistics from the most recent federal Schools and Staffing Survey showing 82 percent of public school teachers identified as white. That figure has changed little in more than 15 years. Data from a similar survey conducted by the Department of Education in 2000 indicated 84 percent of teachers identified as white.

Those interesting statistics remind us that when we speak of the positive influence diversity can have in our schools, we must ensure our teachers and administrators represent the diversity we see in our student population.

Love Public Education

AASA has launched an I Love Public Education campaign. We need this campaign to applaud the work in our public schools to embrace diversity regardless of whether we are defining it as racial diversity, socioeconomic background, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, religion or any other classification used to identify students or staff.

Our public schools offer many examples of leadership focused on embracing diversity and addressing issues of equity. The North Clackamas School District in Milwaukie, Ore., led by AASA’s 2017 National Superintendent of the Year Matt Utterback, adopted a district equity policy and developed a strategic plan that captures the district’s focus on celebrating diversity in North Clackamas and closing any gaps that challenge the success of each student.

We can state I Love Public Education because we have dedicated leaders like Utterback who not only lead the way in addressing equity, but also share their good work with other districts so they may benefit.

We need to shine the spotlight on our school leaders who are redefining, redesigning and re-imagining schools to celebrate diversity and address matters of equity. Share your good news about diversity, equity and innovation in your public school at #ILovePublicEducation.

GAIL PLETNICK is AASA president in 2017-18. E-mail: gail.pletnick@dysart.org. Twitter: @GPletnickDysart
Our Campaign for Equity

AASA THIS YEAR has set a goal to position superintendents as equity thought leaders in education. The climate that permeates our country and seeps into our schools and classrooms is divisive and some would suggest permissive of intolerant behavior rather than the inclusiveness and equity we seek.

Who best to take on the role of champion for equity for children than the superintendents of the schools that serve those children?

The Brown decision was a major step toward equity, but last year a Government Accountability Office report showed 62 years later our schools are resegregating. Between 2001 and 2014, the proportion of schools where more than 75 percent of the students are poor, black and Hispanic increased from 9 percent to 16 percent.

The report also found that “compared with other schools, these schools offered disproportionately fewer math, science and college-preparatory courses and had disproportionately higher rates of students who were held back in 9th grade, suspended or expelled.”

Hurtful Policies

As had been the case in the years prior to the Brown decision in 1954, schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students are not afforded the level of services and opportunities as less-segregated schools receive. Because of the way we fund our schools via property taxes, the zip code continues to be the best predictor of a quality education.

Federal funding attempts to level the playing field, but at 10 percent, the funding is inadequate and the White House and congressional proposals to cut funding will further hurt impoverished school systems. Advocates of charter schools say they are a lifeline for students trapped in segregated schools, but charters not under the control of the local board and superintendent siphon dollars away from the public schools, leaving the remaining students with even fewer resources.

A 2016 Brookings Institution report, “Segregation, Race and Charter Schools: What Do We Know?” found “individual charter schools are generally more racially segregated than traditional public schools that serve the same geographical area.” There are insinuations nationwide that charter schools and voucher providers are becoming the vehicle for resegregation.

The push for vouchers is also problematic, posing another threat to achieving equity. The Center for American Progress recently released a report, “The Racist Origins of Private School Vouchers,” that reminds us that the first private school voucher program in the South was designed to siphon public dollars from public schools to finance white students attending private schools.

Deliberate segregation fosters divisiveness, reeks of prejudice and leads to inequity. There is ample evidence that low-income minority students educated in schools with higher-income white students perform significantly better than their counterparts. Diversity leads to a quality education and engenders mutual respect that transcends economic and racial barriers.

A Launching Pad

How, then, can school system leaders champion equity? The obvious first step is to recognize that equity and equality are not the same. Equity provides each child with what that child needs while equality would provide all children with the same.

A personalized learning approach provides equity while teaching all the children in a class the same thing at the same time perpetuates the achievement gap. Although the transition from the traditional K-12 system, as it exists in most schools, to a personalized, competency-based, progress-at-your-own-pace approach is a challenge, system leaders can set in motion the steps necessary to achieve the transition. We encourage you to join AASAs Personalized Learning Program and network with colleagues who already are deep into the process.

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act creates an opening for greater equity. No Child Left Behind and adequate yearly progress encouraged a teach-to-the test mentality and the branding of children by a single test score. Although ESSA is still an accountability law, it has reduced the test score requirement to just 50 percent and allows for the introduction of other measures. AASAs Redefining Ready is a national campaign that has introduced new research-based metrics to more appropriately assess that students are college-ready, career-ready and life-ready.

Finally, we encourage you to join AASAs I Love Public Education campaign and encourage your school board to adopt the resolution in support of public education on the lovepubliceducation.org web page. As champions for children and public education, we can bring about the equity that continues to elude our country, not just in education, but in our culture.

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