

Equity Lessons Learned

Tips from school leaders on racial equity work

April 01, 2021, ASBJ contributing editor Glenn Cook shares his biggest takeaways from reporting on racism in schools.

Over the past several months, since the pandemic started and protests over racial and social justice began, I've written a series of feature stories for ASBJ on how districts are dealing with the long-standing inequities that students and staff of color face.

Throughout my reporting, I've been struck by the daunting task district leaders face in unpacking generations of policy and practice as they turn their attention—in some cases belatedly, if at all—to the subject of equity. Several themes emerged that you should consider when discussing this work with your internal and external audiences.

Equity work is not a game of hopscotch. You don't get to pick and choose the squares to skip.

Taking a piecemeal approach to equity will not bring you the results you seek. And, because you're dealing with issues that have been ongoing since schools started integration more than 60 years ago, you should not expect to have results overnight.

Carl Rush, equity and community engagement coordinator for Virginia's Winchester Public Schools, says equity work "requires you to look at what's in your closet and deal with what's tucked away that you don't want to address." Rush says we talk about justice "because we want to feel good," but discussions about equity require districts to "start to address anti-racism work as a whole."

"Equity work transcends time. On any given day you're working on the past, present, and future simultaneously," Rush says, comparing the work to peeling an onion. "Each time you pull back a layer it produces more tears. There are decades of systemic practices that you're unrolling if you're doing it correctly, and most people just want it to go away. They don't want it to address it."

As part of Winchester's equity efforts, district policies have been reviewed extensively over the past two years. Using an equity lens in that review, Rush says, has helped the district "see where there are inequities and make changes."

"Many people want to see equity in a way that they can feel an immediate effect from it themselves, but what they fail to see is that often the feeling they're ready to feel may create inequity somewhere else," he says. "If you're going to change things, you must look at the policies, rules, and regulations that you have in place. If your policies don't show it, then your students and staff are not going to feel it."

Having dissenters at the table is not only OK, but necessary.

Mary Rice-Boothe, chief access and equity officer for the Leadership Academy, says the 60-20-20 rule applies here. In most equity work, 60 percent will be your "true leaders and champions," 20 percent will have "trepidation about doing the work vocally and visibly," and 20 percent will not be interested in engaging with the district.

“You’re not going to get anywhere by spending your time on the 20 percent who are against you, but you will by spending time on the ones who are not quite sure and by keeping the 60 percent who are your champions,” says Rice-Boothe, whose New York City-based organization has worked with a number of districts on equity initiatives, including Des Moines Public Schools. “You’ve got to continue to reinforce, celebrate, and support those folks who are your coalition and want to do this work. You’ve got to keep them motivated because this work is hard.”

Rush says he’s “learned a lot when we have dissenters at the table.”

“One question you’ve got to ask yourself is ‘Are we attempting to regift the same gift but with different packaging?’ If so, that’s a problem,” Rush says. “Dissent gives us a real-life opportunity to have the conversations necessary to drive results. It’s really about the conversations and relationships if we’re going to move the data in the way we need it to go.”

When you face opposition, don’t be afraid to ask hard questions, Rice-Boothe says. “You should push back on parents as well. ‘What is it that you are concerned about or worried about when it comes to having more students have more access to the things they need?’” she says. “This is part of getting better and being better sometimes requires loss. The evolution of everything is that you have to lose something to gain something in the end.”

Achievement gaps and opportunity gaps are not separate, and equal does not mean equitable.

“If you have an achievement gap, you have an opportunity gap. Period. You can’t separate the two,” Rush says, pointing to the lack of technology and internet access in low-income neighborhoods that has hampered virtual learning efforts in many districts. “It’s non-negotiable. If you address the opportunity gap, the achievement gap will close as well.”

Sherry Breed, chief of the equity and excellence division for Texas’ Fort Worth Independent School District, says the community has “for the most part” been supportive of ongoing equity efforts. But, she notes, there has been some pushback.

“Equitable means giving everyone what they need so everyone is successful, and that’s going to mean in some communities you put more resources behind them,” Breed says. “There’s a small group that from time to time that will say, ‘But you’re taking things away from my children,’ or ‘Why can’t my children have the strongest teachers?’ But we can’t always be equal.”

“We’ve tried every research-based strategy we know, and we don’t have better data today than we had five years ago in that area,” Van Heukelum says. “That’s frustrating and discouraging, but you can’t be defensive about it. You have to be transparent. If you are promoting only the things you can share as wins, people will call you on that real fast.”

Want to Have a Greater Impact on Equity in Your District?

NSBA’s Equity Symposium provides a forum for public school and community leaders and advocates to examine and discuss the strategies, current trends, research, and best practices around equity in our K-12 schools. Come hear speakers such as Joanna Lohman, author of *Raising Tomorrow’s Champions*, former professional soccer player, and member of the U.S. Women’s National Team speak about her platform for social impact. [Learn more.](#)