Equity and Cultural Competence

Navigating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Schools: Five Crucial Considerations

Reflecting on and implementing effective systems to address inequity is challenging work.

Often, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in schools fail because they lean on isolated fixes to address systemic problems. These unsuccessful efforts tend to focus on specific actions, not on solving the underlying issues that led to them. The challenge is compounded by the need to create a shared vision—crucial to the success of any systemwide initiative—yet more difficult to make a reality, in the area of equity, given our current cultural and political climate.

As leaders, we need to put in the work to recognize bias and privilege in our policies and practices, learn and implement techniques to mitigate them, and apply that work to all aspects of our school system.

For example, consider: *How do bias and privilege show up in our academic counseling systems? What roles do they play in our disciplinary procedures? How do they impact our curriculum, instruction, and grading?*

According to leadership coach Jamila Dugan, "transformation requires investment in personal and interpersonal development, awareness and creation of shared cultural practices, and the redesign of inequitable systems—all at the same time."

What follows are five key considerations for navigating the challenges around DEI, creating a systemwide response to inequity, and building environments where *all* students feel like they belong.

1. Get Comfortable

As a school leader who led the turnaround of four urban schools in New Jersey, Baruti Kafele encourages leaders to use this simple definition of equity: "Meeting young people where they are, as they are." By focusing on this phrase and making sure the social-emotional needs of students are met, school leaders can begin to use data as evidence to guide adults' decision-making and ultimately make positive, systemwide progress.
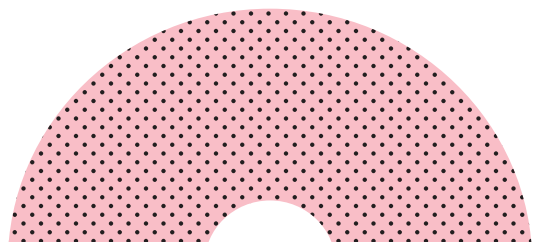
2. Know Your Why

Shift away from adopting short-term practices and programs in reaction to inequity. Instead, use a vigilant approach that considers diversity, equity, and inclusion in everything you do. It may not be easy, but it is the best way to proceed—know your *why* and develop an organizational or collective *why*. An equity initiative is not another thing to check off your list, but the lens through which you should strive to see and operate. As leadership coach and ASCD author Jill Harrison Berg shares, individual efforts tend to fall short—despite best intentions. For real change to occur, individual and organization efforts need to be connected, coordinated, and consistent.

3. Remove Illusions

Focus on the "how-to" in equity-related professional learning. Equity PD that misfires leaves educators feeling frustrated and unclear about how to make a positive impact. While these experiences may receive high marks from participants, they generally leave individual biases and systemic barriers unchanged. For equity PD to work, it should focus on effectively changing educational practice to bring about more equitable outcomes for students. This approach to equity PD helps educators learn how to apply specific practices in their own context. Instead of just pointing out where bias is present, effective PD teaches techniques for reducing bias.
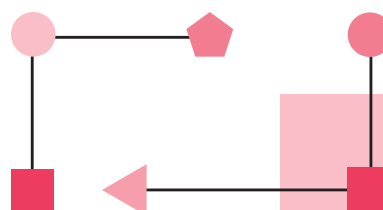
4. Reevaluate Your Approach to Discipline

When attempts to implement systemwide practices that support inclusion and equity are siloed, schools risk repeating flawed disciplinary procedures. Decades of research show that punishment, exclusion, and removal don't change students' behavior. Many leaders are evaluating new methods that focus on inclusive practices to emphasize discipline without punishment. The key is prioritizing communal care and personal accountability over exclusion and punishment.

5. Implement Specific Coaching for Equity

Based on the work by the Harvard Graduate School of Education RIDES project, coaching for equity requires a unique set of knowledge and skills. "Coaches need to know when (and how) to utilize both *technical* fixes and *adaptive* solutions," write Candice Bocala and RoLesia Holman. Because addressing issues of inequity can challenge the status quo, it requires coaching where creditability, accountability, and authority are established up front. Coaching thrives when there is a strong awareness of the unique challenges in the school system and when coaches form trusted relationships.

Creating a safe community where all members feel like they belong is paramount. We are here to help. With an ASCD partner matched to your system's unique needs, we can support your professional learning needs as you navigate the challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

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