

Boardsmanship Review

Learning to Lead for Equity

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By Kimberly Charis

More than 65 years after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*,¹ educators, advocates, and policymakers still struggle with the perpetuation of separate and unequal public schools in the United States and the inequitable student outcomes they produce. Within the same state, and in some cases inside the same district, there are schools that lack resources and human capital to effectively educate students. As was true in the Civil Rights era, the quality of education can be predicted by a student's race, academic ability, cultural background, family circumstances, and zip code. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that K-12 public schools have become increasingly more segregated since *Brown*. The percentage of high-poverty schools and those with a majority of African American and Hispanic students has more than doubled, from 7,009 schools to 15,089 schools, between the 2000–01 and 2013–14 school years.²

Many state boards of education put equity at the center of their missions, as does NASBE. Yet as individuals and boards, we continue to wrestle with what that means in practice and how to translate intentions into effective action. Could the inability—or even unwillingness—to engage diverse perspectives be the reason we struggle to address inequities in public education?

Each board member and concerned citizen has a point of view about equity issues in the U.S. public education system and what it means to effectively educate all students. Can you remember a recent conversation you had about failing schools with a group of colleagues, friends, or family members who shared your cultural identity or point of view? You probably recall the friendly exchange of ideas—citing statistical and anecdotal data that identified the root of every problem. It was edifying. You left the conversation convinced that your particular viewpoint was fair and reasonable. You may not have received

greater insight or motivation to convince those outside your circle of what appeared obvious to you and your peers, but you were hopeful and empowered to make a difference—like a superhero who just discovered their superpower. That is, until you found yourself at the boardroom table with another group of passionate superheroes who had different ideas about educational equity. Not only did they have a different understanding of the problem, but they were biased, intolerant, and misinformed. They were your kryptonite. Or so it seemed to you.

Consider the following perspectives for and against school choice related by education writer Valerie Strauss.³

School choice supporters say:

- Many traditional public schools, especially in urban communities, are failing poor students and students of color and can't be saved.
- Poor and middle-class parents should have the right to escape failing neighborhood schools in the same way that wealthy people do by paying for private schools.
- Public schools should be run as if they are businesses, subject to competition from other educational institutions and subject to closure if they don't work.

School choice critics say:

- Traditional public schools must accept all children, but choice options can be selective about the children they educate.
- Traditional public schools are hurt when resources are diverted from districts that are chronically underfunded.
- The public education system cannot be run

like a business because students are not products. Furthermore, choice schools are not accountable to the public the same way traditional public schools are, and oversight is lax in many states, leading to financial and other scandals.

Can you relate to any of these perspectives? Perspectives are products of a particular cultural lens, which is shaped primarily by our race, cultural background, social status, and experiences. Our individual lens helps us function in society, but it is neither objective nor universal.⁴

There is much to learn about equity and equality from our individual and collective experiences. The continuum of understanding is broad and marked with diversity of thought. Engaging in conversations with people, particularly with those who do not share our particular perspective or cultural identity, is valuable. Intercultural conversations help widen our perspectives and paint a bigger picture of the societal issues we face. Such conversations can uncover new information or a critical perspective that we would not have considered otherwise. They can point us to a policy or practice that could move the needle further toward educational equity.

When policymakers, educators, and advocates come together to discuss the challenge of effectively educating all students, they naturally bring personal perspectives, biases, ignorance, and insight. They will offer solutions based on personal knowledge, cultural beliefs, and experience. But when they actively par-

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ticipate in intercultural conversations in order to recognize and understand differing points of view, the critical perspectives that surface eventually will deepen the work.

Developing the skill to engage diverse perspectives is not easy. It takes patience, curiosity, an attitude of respect, and a huge dose of humility. However, by mastering this new superpower, we will find ourselves developing into more influential, respected leaders.

Glenn Singleton, founder of the Pacific Educational Group and the architect behind the Courageous Conversations Protocol, outlines several conditions for effective interracial dialogue. The third condition, engaging multiple perspectives, allows participants to sustain a conversation after they have agreed to take another person's beliefs and experiences into consideration. Its goal is to uncover multiple viewpoints, develop deeper interracial relationships, sustain racial dialogue, and surface critical perspectives.⁵

These skills are essential for state education policymakers, especially state boards of education, who serve as the citizens' voice for education policy in their states. Those who participate in NASBE's Leading for Equity and Excellence Program (LEEP) learn how to engage multiple perspectives through a culturally responsive lens.

LEEP uses a graphic called the Courageous Conversation Compass to help participants develop the will and skill to not only become more comfortable talking about race but to also coordinate diverse perspectives on educational equity. Over time, participants build their capacity to recognize and harness diversity of thought—first by understanding four primary ways that people process information, issues, and events, and then identifying where they are personally as well as the direction from which another individual comes into the conversation. By this means, participants gain broader understanding of an issue.

These are the four cardinal directions of the Courageous Conversation Compass:

- *Emotionally*, we respond to information through feelings, when racial or other social

issues strike us at a physical level and cause an internal sensation such as embarrassment, sadness, shock, or resentment.

- *Intellectually*, our primary response to information may be characterized by personal disconnection with the subject or a search for more information or data. Our intellectual response is often verbal and based in our best thinking.
- *Morally*, we respond from a deep-seated belief that relates to the racial information or event. This belief has to do with the rightness or wrongness of a given issue. The justification of one's moral views are often situated in the "gut" and may not be verbally articulated.
- *Relationally*, we connect and respond to information through our acting or what is most often characterized as specific behaviors and actions.⁶

In working with the compass, participants see that a perspective is not necessarily good or bad, right or wrong, but rather a point of view that reflects a person's perception and experience at a specific time. The compass challenges participants to engage issues from multiple viewpoints, and it reminds us that sometimes others share our perspectives and sometimes they do not.

Validating a perspective is not the same as agreeing with it. When we recognize and seek to understand diverse perspectives, we are validating the fact that everyone has a story and a point of view that drives their passion for educational equity—even if we cannot personally agree with or relate to it. We validate viewpoints in order to sustain a dialogue and keep everyone at the table. Sustained dialogue provides important opportunities to deepen understanding and uncover new ways of looking at the challenge of educational equity. Leaders who can harness diverse perspectives at the boardroom table can avert situations where one way of understanding an issue suppresses or invalidates other points of view, expressions, and experiences and eventually hinders what they are trying to achieve.

NASBE's mission and core values reflect its steadfast commitment to empower members to lead for educational equity. LEEP offers two tracks for professional development: LEEP National Cohort and LEEP State Policy Network. The

LEEP National Cohort is for individual state board members looking for a shared learning experience with a diverse community of professionals from around the country. During the eight-week course, participants build their capacity to identify personal core values for leadership; engage different perspectives while recognizing their own biases; examine the influence of political ideologies, cultural perceptions, and economic structures on public education; and assess strategies to remove structural barriers and close achievement gaps. The LEEP State Policy Network fosters collaboration between state boards, state education agencies, and other state and local leaders working to advance equity. State teams hear from national experts, participate in peer-to-peer discussions, and receive customized training and technical assistance to help them engage different perspectives and strengthen their collective role. Participants say they appreciate the opportunities LEEP offers to learn from others and develop the confidence to engage in tough conversations about educational equity.

Since its inception in 2017, LEEP has coached state board members representing 15 states and the District of Columbia. What could be different in your equity leadership if you were able to better engage diverse perspectives during decision making?

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NOTES

1 National Park Service, "The Road to Justice," Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site website, <https://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>.

2 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "K-12 Education: Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination," GAO-16-345 (Washington, DC: GAO, April 2016).

3 Valerie Strauss, "What 'School Choice' Means in the Era of Trump and DeVos," *Washington Post* (May 22, 2017).

4 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018).

5 Glenn E. Singleton, *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, A SAGE Company, 2015).

6 Ibid.