Equity Leadership Dispositions

Education leaders play a crucial role in identifying and addressing inequities in schools and school systems. To do that work effectively, what do leaders need to know and be able to do? The Leadership Academy developed a list of six research-based leadership dispositions we have found are crucial for leaders to build a path toward creating a school community by, with and for every student.

1 Reflect on personal assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Personal beliefs determine how an individual sees the world, other people, and oneself. Our beliefs and unconscious biases determine our actions and practices, and these actions inform how systems develop and operate, including our current education system. For leaders to feel comfortable addressing issues of bias, inequity, and race, they first need to have a heightened understanding of their own identities, values, assumptions and biases. In addition to this self-exploration, leaders must cultivate and maintain a deep understanding of how privilege, power, and oppression operate, historically and currently in school and society. Without a firm self-examination of their own identity and role in historically inequitable structures, leaders risk reproducing inequities inside and outside their schools and systems. As leaders of diverse communities, such critical self-reflection should be an ongoing, lifelong process.

2 Publicly model a personal belief system that is grounded in equity.

Those leading for equity must demonstrate that addressing racial inequity is a priority. Leaders accomplish this by consistently naming equity as a driving force behind leadership actions and decisions. By taking a strong and vocal stance, leaders communicate the value of equity across all practice and can establish a coherent and common purpose for members of the learning community. To help others build the skills and will to examine the impact of race and value equity as a shared goal, leaders model their own learning, self-disclosing and acknowledging personal biases and fears. There can be an anxiety and fear in offending,

appearing angry, or sounding ignorant when discussing issues of race and inequality. By modeling vulnerability and emphasizing that mistakes will be made when speaking about issues of race, leaders can help others overcome those fears and encourage them to take risks in exploring and sharing their own feelings.

3 Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decision-making, and practice.

Racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students and families experience school differently, making it essential to examine the norms and interactions around race, ethnicity, and diversity within the school environment. Equity-centered environments are responsive to and inclusive of the cultural identities of students, staff, and the surrounding community. Leaders play an integral part in developing the school environment and in holding staff accountable to meeting the needs of diverse students and families. Leaders therefore model culturally responsive practices, including communicating high expectations for all students; designing curriculum that incorporates students' backgrounds, languages and learning styles; and working with parents and families as valued and respected partners. Stronger partnerships and collaboration between schools and communities improve family engagement and increases the sense of trust between students, families, and schools. It can also reduce cultural misunderstandings and further understanding of the diversity of beliefs and values in the community.

4 Purposefully build the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school.

Educational equity work cannot happen in isolation. Without a collaborative effort, staff may believe equity concerns are someone else's job and not their own. To ensure members of the learning community both understand and invest in addressing issues of equity and inclusion, leaders build their capacity through collaborative dialogue and professional learning. Leaders designate time and space for staff to examine their personal beliefs and collaborate to change educational practice. They work with staff in a democratic manner, implementing shared decision-making structures and developing a culture of trust and respect. These leaders understand that empowering staff is a key feature of creating more socially just schools.

5 Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations.

If schools are to evolve, the organizational structure of schools must be transformed. To do this, leaders must review policies, practices, and structures and remove potential barriers that disadvantage students on the basis of race or

ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Students that embody one or many of these characteristics have been minoritized by society and individuals telling them that they are less than and incapable of the skills and abilities of white dominant culture. Confronting these long-standing beliefs and practices requires a collaborative effort, where stakeholders engage in intentional conversations about who benefits from current policy and practice and who is being minoritized or disadvantaged. Leaders can initiate the process by examining individual and system data that have been disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and other characteristics; conducting an equity audit; and engaging in a process of collaborative inquiry.

6 Create system and structures to promote equity with a focus on minoritized populations.

Once barriers are identified, leaders must then ensure that new policies and practices are created that prioritize student need and promote equity. School systems in which all students are successful are systems that create policies based on a thorough analysis of student, teacher, and school data, changing community demographics, and available financial, material, time, and human resources. Equity work is complex, requiring fundamental structural changes and coordinated efforts. Leaders must establish clarity and agreement on a shared vision and plan of action, define clearly articulated measures of success, and build a community-wide commitment to equity and access. Finally, leaders must ensure that this work is not seen as an add-on, but a lens through which all decisions will be made.