

HOW CAN K-12 LEADERS ADVANCE RACIAL EQUITY IN THE FACE OF BOOK BANS AND CENSORSHIP MEASURES?

Confronting the Challenges of Advancing Racial Equity in K-12 Schools

Principals advancing racial equity initiatives face greater scrutiny after 42 states have taken action to regulate or prohibit discussions of race, racism, or systemic inequality in schools (Schwartz, 2022). Beyond censoring speech, 32 states have banned books, blocking student access to more than 2,500 works about or by people of color¹ and LGBTQIA+ people (Pendharkar, 2022). As reports of principals, teachers, and librarians getting disciplined or fired continue to appear in local and national headlines, some school leaders have quietly pulled books from shelves before any bans or complaints were escalated and advised librarians and teachers to exercise restraint when adopting any reading material that might upset parents or local community members (Natanson, 2022). Despite these censorship measures, many principals continue to advance equity and social justice efforts in their schools.



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Anti-CRT (critical race theory) campaigns by conservative groups have driven many of these censorship measures, banning the use of CRT in K12 schools. Moreover, misinformation about CRT in K12 schools has been weaponized to incite fear and intimidate educators working to address equity disparities in their communities (Sawchuck, 2021). *While these efforts have attempted to quell racial equity efforts in schools, it has also emphasized the important role leaders play in ensuring racial equity remains a key priority in their organization.*

Decades of research (c.f., Furman, 2012; Gooden, 2012; Gooden and Dantley, 2015; Kose, 2009; Santamaria and Santamaria, 2015; and Theoharis, 2008) support the vital importance of a school leader's capacity to promote racial equity, especially in districts that have historically underserved students and families of color.

High-Leverage Leadership Practices

In our experience facilitating 80+ racial equity academies for principals, superintendents, and other administrators in hundreds of

schools, we have observed several high-leverage leadership practices the most effective leaders use to achieve equity in their schools. In sharing these observations, we acknowledge that censorship laws and book bans vary widely and have been enforced differently in each state or local district.

For leaders committed to advancing racial equity while facing increased scrutiny, we offer high-leverage leadership strategies in this brief.



K-12 Practice Brief

How can K-12 leaders advance racial equity in the face of book bans and censorship measures?

Spring 2023

Eight Practical Steps for K-12 Leaders Advancing Racial Equity in Schools

1. Clear and Consistent Messaging

Principals who repeatedly say that racial equity is a school priority in faculty, staff, and community meetings can make their stance clear and consistent, especially when the stakes are high. For example, in a school experiencing a high turnover of teachers of color, a leader can say, “Research shows teachers of color boost reading and math scores, graduation rates, and college entry for all students. Our new faculty recruitment strategy will prioritize partnerships with programs that graduate more teachers of color.” Staying on message increases a leader’s credibility in the face of political tensions or public criticism of school equity initiatives. In doing so, they will strengthen critical support to ensure that advancing equity initiatives are not optional.

Consistent with previous studies (c.f., Harper, 2015; Khalifa, 2012), *equity-driven leaders can challenge deficit narratives about students of color and make it publicly known that they see success in their schools, assets in their students, and partners in the teachers who believe in their students.* With a clear and consistent message, leaders can more effectively build coalitions of families, community members, board members, staff, and faculty to effect change in their buildings.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: How do you communicate that racial equity is a priority in your school community?

Question: What does success look like in your school? How are deficit narratives challenged when they are observed?

2. Build Community Connections

Leaders who recognize their schools as information-rich, nurturing places to meaningfully engage students and families are more likely to make equity gains in their schools. Lebon “Trey” D. James III and David E. DeMatthews (2022) advise new principals to learn about their communities by seeking out “insights into the lived experiences of students and families.” *While most principals have varying success in hosting community events on their campuses, research demonstrates (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ishimaru, 2013) school leaders who deliberately participate in community spaces outside school are more likely to connect directly with students and families of color.* For example, knowing that your school serves a large Latinx² Catholic community provides an opportunity to get to know the nearby parish where most students attend church and religious classes. Connecting with community members who most disagree with equity initiatives also has the potential to de-escalate opposition, clear up misinformation, and increase transparency. These connections are necessary for leading equity initiatives with community input and backing, especially when the community is divided in supporting those initiatives.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: Where are you building positive community-based relationships outside of your school?

Question: Where are the overlapping spaces for your school and its surrounding community to come together?

3. Listen with Resilience

In our experience, school leaders who skillfully listened with resilience to individuals who sought to shut down equity initiatives were more effective at advancing equity.

Listening with resilience meant slowing down to hear what people had to say, documenting their concerns, and avoiding a defensive posture in response to adversity.

In her recent book, *The Listening Leader*, Shane Safir (2017) wrote about the listening practices of principals who were more successful at creating conditions for equity in their schools. These leaders paused to reflect on their assumptions or biases about the person lodging a complaint, responded compassionately to concerns raised, and consistently recentered the focus on fostering equitable learning conditions for students and families who race-avoidant practices have historically harmed.

Listening strategies can also help leaders better navigate criticism by paying attention to nonverbal cues. Safir (2017) recommends saying aloud: “I’m seeing a lot of crossed arms and furrowed brows; let’s pause and talk about what’s coming up for people” (p. 295). Doing so communicates that you see people in the moment, and you want to hear them out.

Consider the possibility that the person disagreeing with you might be one of the school’s most beloved teachers or staff members. Leaders can affirm someone’s willingness to disagree and stay in the conversation by saying, “Conversations about equity usually bring up a range of emotions and perspectives for everyone; thanks for being willing to sit with the discomfort this discussion might be causing you.” Taking up less air time and holding space for dissenting opinions can normalize respectful disagreement and increase school leaders’ resiliency as they advance equity initiatives.



PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: When faced with criticism, how do you manage your emotions so they do not distract you from the person or their message? What would it take to create a mental picture of their experience?

Question: How do you demonstrate empathy for someone who seems angry with you? What would it take to validate the person’s concern even if you do not agree with their point of view?

4. Adaptive Problem-Solving

Principals can partner with teachers in diagnosing equity problems and recognize their shared investment. Safir (2017) recommends conducting “listening campaigns” by assembling leadership teams, joining smaller department and grade level meetings, presenting data, asking questions, listening carefully, and making sure faculty and staff have input on the “current-state” story. Sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev (2016) wrote about the failures of diversity programs in the business sector. They found that companies were more successful when leaders stopped trying to control how employees addressed equity problems and instead facilitated opportunities to solve the problem together. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky’s (2009) framework for adaptive leadership addresses what it takes to mobilize people to share responsibility rather than push through top-down changes. They argue that adaptive leaders engage members of their organization to move beyond their comfort zones and build capacity together.

Turning to staff and faculty members as valued, knowledgeable insiders who regularly interact with parents and community stakeholders can help leaders better understand how people are affected by decisions being made to advance equity. In doing so, they can be more successful at addressing difficult challenges as they leverage the collective expertise in the room to advance a common cause.

5. Principal as Lead Learner

Principals and district leaders in touch with their own teaching practices have higher credibility with their teachers. These leaders show up to professional development as both leaders and teachers invested in developing more equitable teaching practices. Principals willing to rehearse instructional strategies alongside teachers or speak up about teaching mistakes they had personally made in their efforts to improve practice are more likely to build genuine rapport with teachers. We have observed some leaders successfully design and lead professional learning experiences for their faculty or executive teams. Others publicly state that they teach equity leadership or teacher preparation courses at local colleges and universities to other aspiring principals and teachers. No matter their approach, these leaders demonstrate a personal investment in the quality of instruction as fellow educators in their schools.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: How are faculty and staff meaningfully involved in determining your school’s equity challenges and co-generating measurable outcomes?

Question: What opportunities are available for staff and faculty members to innovate and lead in partnership with you?

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: Are you willing to model new, equitable instructional strategies in classrooms alongside teachers?

Question: How do you model being a leader and learner alongside teachers?

6. Model Reflective Leadership

In our observations, leaders who experienced greater success advancing equity were those who reflected on their own racially biased decisions or assumptions that arose in daily interactions with students, families, and staff. In her recent article examining the effectiveness of leadership professional learning programs, Denisa Superville (2022) reported personal reflection as a key component in the development of equity-minded school leaders, helping them “examine their personal experiences and how those experiences influence their leadership.” When carried out with peers, this form of unguarded self-reflection can be essential to what equity scholar Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz calls healing through an “archaeology of self.” According to Dr. Sealey-Ruiz (2022), educators who engage in this archaeological dig are better positioned to “understand that their beliefs about students and their community dictate how much or little they will invest in them” (p. 24). For example, one school leader in our series reflected on how he shared racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds with his students but held the same deficit views of his students that teachers had of him growing up.

Whenever possible, leaders can reflect on how race intersects with their other privileged and marginalized identities, such as the different ways gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, socioeconomic status, or religious affiliation influence their leadership roles and experiences.

Principals more effective at leading equity initiatives are speak candidly about their own experiences with race and racism, question their own biases openly, and see themselves as reflective partners in their work with teachers, students, and families.

“Principals and district leaders in touch with their own teaching practices have higher credibility with their teachers.”

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: Do you regularly engage in critical self-reflection on your own biases, blindspots, and actions? For example, how do you racially identify yourself as a school leader? How frequently and what types of interactions did you have with people with different racial identities growing up? How does your perspective inform what kinds of communication behaviors you consider to be normal or appropriate?

Question: How does your positionality intersect with the identities of people in your school community? How might gender/race influence the way another person receives your message and how you receive theirs? How might your status as a school leader impact the psychological safety of another person in a discussion about equity?

7. Turn to Critical Friends

Most importantly, we noticed that the leaders who turned to their equity-minded peers were more likely to thrive. Strong peer networks offer leaders the chance to receive support and challenging feedback from people who are rooting for them. Under pressure, equity-driven principals turn to peers they consider critical friends – fellow leaders who have had their turn navigating turbulent meetings, adversarial relationships, and coordinated efforts to block their school’s equity initiatives. *Leaders benefit from peers who question their assumptions and work with them to experiment with different approaches as they repeatedly encounter consequential power relations in their school communities.* Additionally, many school leaders seek out more professional learning opportunities than are available to them. Districts can promote and support equity-based affinity groups for school leaders to develop critical friendships as they work to advance equity initiatives in their respective schools.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: Do you regularly seek the support of like-minded equity practitioners to learn from their experiences? If not, how can you build a supportive community in your organization?

Question: How might your district promote equity-based affinity groups for leaders in which critical friendships can be developed?

8. Promote Race-Conscious Data Literacy

School leaders who review student success outcomes are encouraged to explore what it means to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity. Doing so can 1) reveal hidden patterns of racial inequity that are masked in aggregate student outcomes data, 2) raise awareness of teachers and leaders about the experiences of historically minoritized students, and 3) change the ways in which data are discussed and why racial disparities exist and persist (Bensimon, 2005). *Equity-driven leaders can take personal and institutional responsibility for students’ success, which shifts the focus of data-informed discussions with teachers and staff members to which practices at their school foster more equitable learning conditions for students of color.* Throughout these efforts, school leaders can continuously turn to evidence to guide decisions about policies and practices advancing or undermining equity in their schools. Principals can also turn to experts in their district to assist them in disaggregating and reporting data to unearth a deeper story of what is happening in their schools.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Question: How often is your schoolwide data disaggregated by race and ethnicity? What action is taken when patterns of racial inequities emerge?

Question: How can race-conscious data trends inform school policy and procedure changes?

As district leaders, principals, and teachers in leadership roles face another year of increased restrictions and possible censure, the high-leverage practices described in this brief may prove beneficial. Leaders who routinely demonstrate these practices may observe shifts in attitudes and behaviors in their school community that support achieving more equitable outcomes for historically underserved students of color.

School leaders willing to speak up and take action to address racial inequities are prioritizing what

matters most to them – building more equitable places for students, families, and teachers to thrive in the face of adversity.



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Endnotes

1. Throughout this practice brief, we refer to people of color, students of color, and/or families of color to indicate multiple groups of historically minoritized people as distinctive from the racialized experiences of white people. Language describing any group of people in aggregate, like other socially constructed labels, does not reflect the distinctive identities or range of racial experiences of any one person or group of people. We build upon the work of Rita Kohli (2022) and others by using the terminology "...of color," not to erase the powerful differences between racial groups, but to acknowledge the ways racism has impacted people not racialized as white as a mechanism of white supremacy.
2. The term Latinx disrupts the erasure of women and gender nonconforming people who have challenged the longstanding gendered labels of Latino and Chicano in the United States.

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ADDITIONAL TOOLS

For additional practice briefs, equity resources, learning tools, or to learn more about our work in K12 schools and districts, please contact us at: k12race@usc.edu.

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