Equity Professional Learning for Educators

What Leaders Need to Know

Learn more at www.corwin.com/deepequity
The pandemic of 2020 revealed many disparities in our education system, including gaps in achievement, technology, and access. As we begin to reopen classrooms and rebuild our school communities, we know our equity gaps will be both deeper and broader than they were before. Because of this, our equity work now and going forward must be more purposeful, more focused, more effective, and more systemic.

As educational leaders, we can ensure we are creating equitable learning environments and experiences for all learners through the implementation of comprehensive and systemic professional development. This guide will help you clarify your approach to make the PD as meaningful and successful as possible for your educators and the students you serve.
Key Questions to Consider

School-wide or district-wide initiatives of any type require significant investment of time, people, and resources to implement successfully. When it comes to complex, long-term issues such as equity and diversity, however, it is especially critical to set your organization up for success from the very beginning. Here are key questions to consider as you start planning your equity initiative.

**Question 1:**

Does your professional learning staff have the expertise and experience to deliver the training?

Conversations around sensitive topics such as race, poverty, gender, religion, and other facets of diversity can sometimes become highly charged and emotional. Participants may have a variety of responses, including defensiveness, resistance, defiance, denial, or withdrawal. Equity PD requires skilled facilitators who have experience navigating tense moments, responding to outbursts, de-escalating conflict, and maintaining a safe, supportive environment for all participants.

**What you can do:**

Talk to your professional learning staff about their comfort level and experience in delivering equity-focused professional learning. If needed, explore additional resources that may assist your staff in developing their skills, such as professional books, online courses, associations, or specialized training. You may also want to consider bringing in consultants with expertise in diversity training specifically for K-12 school districts to build capacity within your organization.

**Question 2:**

Have you built consensus around the need for equity at all levels of the organization?

Successful implementation of any initiative requires support and buy-in from all levels of the organization. However, when it comes to initiatives around equity or other potentially divisive issues, stakeholder buy-in and leadership support are especially critical. The organization must create an inclusive environment where representatives from various groups can feel heard—including staff, students, families, and community members—while clearly communicating the importance of the initiative. Leaders must model the attitude they wish all staff to adopt and be seen as participants rather than observers of the process.

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**Did you know?**

- The Hispanic dropout rate decreased from 21% in 2006 to 8% in 2018.  
  —National Center for Education Statistics

- African-American students are over 3x more likely to be suspended than white students.  
  —U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016
What you can do:
To lessen emotions around an equity initiative, begin with the facts. Examine your data to identify any gaps in student achievement and other indicators of school quality. Do certain subpopulations have lower graduation rates than others? Are some groups disproportionately disciplined, suspended, or expelled? Does the composition of student clubs, the prom court, honors classes, or the cheerleading squad reflect the composition of your schools? Once you have gathered the facts, you can begin building awareness around equity issues and gaining buy-in across your district and with families in your community.

Question 3:
How much prior training have your educators and leaders received on culturally responsive practices?
Some teachers may take a course on multicultural education for their degree or accreditation, but not all teachers may have been required to do so. Teachers who entered the profession through alternative certification pathways in particular may lack the necessary background knowledge to navigate highly diverse classrooms, where they are more likely to be placed. In addition, coursework and textbooks may not fully prepare educators for the complex, real-world challenges of today’s classrooms, where differences in race, gender, poverty, language, religion, ability, sexual orientation, home environment, and more, can all affect educators’ ability to build authentic relationships with students.

What you can do:
To gauge the need for professional learning around culturally responsive teaching practices, conduct a needs assessment survey for all staff members, including teachers, school administrators, support staff, and certified personnel. The results can help you determine the level and type of professional learning needed.

PD Bookshelf
Recommended resources for facilitating professional learning around equity and cultural competency
See more resources at www.corwin.com/equity

We Can’t Lead Where We Won’t Go
An Educator’s Guide to Equity
Gary R. Howard

Cultural Proficiency
A Manual for School Leaders
Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri-Robins, Raymond D. Terrell, Delores B. Lindsey

Guiding Teams to Excellence with Equity
Culturally Proficient Facilitation
John Krownapple
Common Pitfalls

Potentially divisive initiatives such as equity initiatives carry special risks for schools and districts. Oftentimes educators can find themselves in a quandary: failure to address inequities can lead to lawsuits or federal and state sanctions, while acting too hastily without an evidence-based plan in place can lead to ineffective implementation, wasted time and resources, or even further divisions within the organization or community. Here are some common pitfalls to keep in mind as you proceed.

**Pitfall #1:**
Failure to establish a safe environment for discussion and learning

As an educational leader, it is important to gauge the readiness of your school or district to engage with issues of equity and diversity. Has your organization established the right tone for approaching equity professional learning? Is there a safe, trusting environment for staff members to speak openly and honestly without fear of reprimand? Can staff members be vulnerable in front of others? It is important for leaders and facilitators to lay the groundwork by establishing the right tone and creating relational trust within the group before asking staff members to be open to learning.

**Pitfall #2:**
Not communicating the importance of the initiative and expectations

Pay careful attention to the way the PD is framed when you roll out the initiative across your organization: Is there an air of reluctant compliance? Do communications carry a message of “shame and blame” toward certain groups? Or does the leadership team see the PD as a shared part of the district’s mission to educate all students, regardless of background? Is there an expectation that all staff participate fully? Much of your organization’s reaction will be influenced by both the spoken and unspoken messages communicated by the leadership team as the initiative is announced and implemented.

**Pitfall #3:**
Not tailoring the PD specifically for classroom teachers

When it comes to getting the most out of your equity initiative, it is not enough for staff to merely understand differences. Educators must know how to use culturally responsive teaching practices to build authentic relationships with students in their classrooms. Effective PD must not only cover the principles of equity and the role of implicit bias, but also provide practical applications for daily classroom instruction.

**Pitfall #4:**
Assuming the work is done once the PD is delivered

The root causes of achievement disparities are often deeply ingrained within a system and most likely developed over many decades. Thus, they are unlikely to be addressed by a single PD session or even multiple sessions over the course of a school year. Rather than view equity as a one-time event or endpoint, school districts should view it as an ongoing journey toward more fully realizing their mission to serve all students. Real, sustainable progress is possible, but only if organizations plan for focused efforts over the long term.
What to Look for When Selecting a Professional Learning Provider

If your needs assessment reveals a need to bring in a professional learning provider, here are questions to ask of potential consultants or vendors to ensure that your investment will benefit your educators and students.

Is the PD program evidence based?
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires school districts that receive federal funds to utilize “evidence-based” approaches that have demonstrated statistically significant positive effects on student outcomes.

Does the program build the capacity of your staff to deliver PD around equity topics in the future?
To maximize your investment, look for “train-the-trainer” models that enable your staff to continue the work after the PD provider has left.

Does the program have a process to establish a safe climate to allow staff to engage in open conversations about persistent inequities?
Many programs focus on delivering knowledge in a one-size-fits-all approach, regardless of potential political/relational tensions or participants’ readiness to learn. Look for PD providers that understand the complexities of human relations and adult learning, and programs that start by creating the right tone and climate.

Does the program provide tools to identify the root causes of inequities in your school/district?
To build the capacity of your organization to address inequities, look for programs that give you the tools to do your own investigation, rather than programs that conduct the analysis for you and issue a report. Having your team analyze the data themselves will not only create transparency and build stakeholder buy-in within your organization, it will also enable the organization to conduct similar analyses in the future, leading to cost savings. Look for PD providers that provide both the tools and the training for your team to conduct its own investigation.

Does the program have a process to establish a safe climate to allow staff to engage in open conversations about persistent inequities?
Many vendors—especially those that do not specialize in education—focus on general principles of equity without helping educators bridge the information to classroom practice. Look for PD providers that not only specialize in systemic equity transformation in K12 districts, but also provide special focus on instructional applications.

How does the professional learning program involve students?
Many programs fail to involve the most important stakeholders of all: the students themselves. Students have significant influence over the culture and climate of a school. When selecting a PD program for your staff, ask the PD provider whether the program brings students into the conversation in an age-appropriate way. Does the program have a process for facilitating intergenerational communication and collaboration? Look for programs that create opportunities for student leadership and for student voices to be heard.
Are you ready?

Excellence and equity for all students is possible, but only when educators are passionately engaged in their work and have the support they need to help every child reach his or her full potential.

Learn more about evidence-based models for promoting educational equity at www.corwin.com/deepequity