

Let's Set a Course to Lead Schools for Equity

By Jon Saphier, Founder of Research For Better Teaching



What does it take to make schools a force for good and for justice?

It takes skillful school leadership by individuals who learn how to envision true equity, accelerate learning, and eliminate obstacles for underserved students.

The Path to Anti-racism and Equity in Schools – What teaching and Leadership Academies Can Do to Point the Way

Many millions of underserved children arrive at school each year with gaps in their experience and in their learning. These include lack of respect for them as learners, their culture and their families, lack of future opportunities to acquire wealth and property, in some cases lack of adequate nutrition and health care, and lack of enrichment experiences in the arts. In the institutions that touch them, it may include a lack of belief or encouragement to succeed. It will take a long time for the broader society to address these damaging gaps, but in schools, we can address them now.

There are 10 different and parallel pathways to Equitable Schools that provide all students with a fair chance at a good life (emphasis on **ALL** students). Effective leaders must know what



specifically to create in their schools and then acquire the skills to do so. That is quite a big task, and it is why the 600+ institutions that train principals need more resources and support.

This turns out to be quite a bit more than skill at starting conversations about race, worthy as that is.

An equitable school doesn't use policies and practices to discriminate against people of color or children living in poverty. This is very difficult when the educators don't even realize it is happening. To get there, white educators moving to equity work deeply to probe their own unexamined world views that come through the lens of whiteness, privilege, and white supremacy. Such a school strives actively to identify and eliminate deep and implicit biases in how it operates (audits of curriculum, reward system, placement in Special Education, suspension rates). But a lot more is required. As Zaretta Hammond has said, we can talk about racism until we're blue in the face, but if we don't change instruction as well, it won't make much difference for underserved students.

So if one is going to lead a school to anti-racist practices and excellence for all students, one needs to take on additional tasks beyond developing faculty awareness of implicit bias and structural racism. Teachers need multiple skills that they don't get in ed. school. The structure of the school and its operating practices need to support the use of those skills. That's where leadership comes in— developing a learning organization where all the internal processes are engineered to foster the ongoing development and support the use of those skills.

In a school designed for equity, one needs to do additional things beyond developing faculty awareness of implicit bias and structural racism. We would see:

- adults convincing discouraged students that they have capable brains and that they can increase their academic ability,
- giving students the tools to do so,
- adults developing authentic personal relationships with students
- teams offering rigorous academic tasks properly scaffolded,
- leaders building a strong open, non-defensive culture for learning among the adults,
- all faculty developing high expertise teaching at certain vital clarity behaviors,
- leaders creating strong support structures inside and outside the school for underserved students.



Framing thought:

It's no good coming up with a list of "musts" that are abstractions if we don't show people how to accomplish these things.

Leaders must follow a pathway for learning for how to teach and lead for an equitable school, or in other words adhere to a curriculum for teaching and leadership academies.

There are several pathways, and the order to embark on them depends largely on the local context. We need to move along all of these pathways eventually. For sure, no one of them is enough.

1. The starter question for each school and district is where are we now?
2. Second, what should leaders work on to develop next in their multi-year journey toward being an equitable school?
3. The next issue is where do we go to acquire the skills needed?

Categories of Curriculum:

1. *Leaders learn how to educate professionals about the history of racism and white supremacy.*

School districts have been doing this for decades without much impact on the experiences of children. If it were done more effectively, teachers would be more motivated to examine their behavior and learn more about implicit bias and how it shows up in their practice. So we need to do it better. It is important and a good starting point, but far from enough.

So yes, let's educate professionals about the history and consequences of racism and white supremacy in this country. If well done and varied enough, this education can be eye-opening for white educators to the pain and dehumanization of people of color continuously in different forms over 400 years, especially formerly enslaved blacks and their descendants. Such education could also show the omissions, distortions, and stereotypes in our media, our culture, and our literature. It should also generate empathy among white educators for the current daily experiences of people of color in the U.S. and be a powerful motivator to dismantle racism.

This education should begin in all teacher and leader preparation programs. But if it doesn't, district leaders and building leaders have to devise approaches that work into local professional development. When applied in comprehensive induction and long-term professional development, it is a significant force in creating equitable schools, especially if it is translated into civilian action fighting against racist policies and beliefs in the community. But that will not be enough if students don't feel included and respected in their own classrooms.



2. Leaders learn how to organize so that each and every student feels respected and worthy.

Leaders can organize a school to accomplish this. There are specific ways to develop student identity and pride in their own cultural background so they see evidence that their identity is present in the curriculum and life of the school (artifacts, heroes). Students of color need to see their culture is deemed worthy of respect, and white children need to know students of color are worthy of respect. This is the opposite of an assimilationist approach which devalues a student's ethnic and cultural background and attempts to erase it.

One approach is a SANKOFA curriculum built into the school rhythm that often marries itself to a [Rites of Passage](#) program for defining adulthood for secondary students. This will be accompanied by learning how to design and teach culturally relevant lessons for the content already in the curriculum. Knowing what such lesson planning and teaching looks and sounds like becomes part of leadership preparation. But making students feel their identity is respected will not be enough if they do not believe they have the intellectual capacity to learn.

3. Leaders learn how to embed in policies, practices, and procedures the consistent messages to all students that "What we're doing is important, You can do it, and I won't give up on you." The leaders also learn how to hire teachers who believe ability can be grown, and behave to convince students of that. Leaders make those behaviors and practices a part of induction and teacher observation and feedback.

Leaders learn how to lead their teachers to get students to believe there is nothing wrong with their individual brains; "smart is something you can get" (Howard 85). Their teachers convince them through daily interactions that they have the intellectual capacity to learn and learn well in all areas (e.g., forget about there being a missing "math gene".) Then give them the tools to do so and the desire to want to. Leaders learn what it looks and sounds like when a teacher can do this.

Persuading students that we believe they are capable, and getting them to believe that is true for them personally, is accomplished through how we speak and behave in very specific recurring events in daily class life (Saphier 2017). These are teachable and learnable behaviors. Leaders make sure this is ongoing PD in the building and part of their feedback to teachers. The behaviors show up as look-fors in classroom observations and visits to team meetings. Thus, anti-racist schools work to ensure all teachers adopt a growth mindset that is not colorblind.

"What we're doing is important, You can do it, and I won't give up on you."

It's also crucial to explain to students themselves how systemic oppression operates to deny students of color equal access to the means of getting smart, and how kids might see and interpret what they encounter as racism in their lives.



4. Culturally Relevant Teaching

This is not about perceptual “learning style” – i.e., visual, tactile, kinesthetic, auditory. It is adapting the instruction to the cultural style of the students as described by Ladson-Billings. Leaders know what this looks and sounds like, and they help their teachers learn how to do so.

But getting students to believe in themselves and making lessons culturally relevant will not be enough if they are not given rigorous work that prepares them for 21st-century workplaces and gets them to college and career readiness.

5. Rigor and Scaffolding

This is a significant, long-term task for leaders to learn about. A rigorous curriculum offers standards-based learning experiences to all students, scaffolded so that those students who need acceleration can do the work. Rigorous teaching requires teacher preparation for understanding exactly what a standard calls for in student performance, requires adult facility in learning and using the learning progressions that stand behind each objective in a rigorous curriculum, and the skills to diagnose gaps in learning and root causes. Another skill is digging into error analysis for individual students to design re-teaching.

These skills require teachers to be thinkers and decision-makers as they dig into learning experiences and student materials. Successful school leaders bring their faculty on board with a study of rigor at the right time in the school’s march toward equity. This includes when and how to study student learning progressions to use for diagnosis.

But putting in place a rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum will not do enough good if we do not elevate High-Expertise Teaching skills of the people delivering rigorous curriculum.

6. High-Expertise Teaching

Students who have been denied access to quality learning experiences, who live in poverty, and are often students of color need the best possible teaching to accelerate their learning and to do rigorous work. This means skillful teachers who can practice High-Expertise Teaching from several domains:

Clarity, especially communication of worthwhile objectives (meaning you check to make sure the students understand the target), crystal clear criteria for success of student products and performances, frequent informal assessments, timely and useful feedback on student work, student error analysis, goal setting, plans of action...to name a few. Teachers do not learn how to use these skills with sufficient proficiency in teacher ed. programs.

Other particularly important skills that students need from the body of High-Expertise Teaching are: design of instructional routines for student choice-making and agency, structuring student self-evaluation, personal relationship building, and living in an environment of class community where the students know and support one another in academic achievement.



But putting in place more High-Expertise Teaching will not accomplish what it could if we do nothing to prevent students from being compromised by arriving every day hungry, or with other burdens for which there may be no institutional support (like trauma and homelessness).

7. Support Structures

Support **structures within schools** include non-punitive tracking systems like the Hierarchy of Interventions at Stevenson H.S. in Illinois, mentors of faculty who follow students throughout their school careers, programs that bring parents and students to school for events that foster pride and allegiance with the school

Structures outside the school include meals programs, after-school programs, parent education classes, student internships, neighborhood medical clinics, daycare for school-age parents (Jacobsen 2019)

All the improvements above will not proceed with maximum effect without knowledgeable leadership that knows how to handle the human dynamics of change.

8. Orchestrating Change for Improvement

The vast literature on leading for change that gets improvement needs to be brought to bear on what principals learn. This includes skills like how to develop a “guiding coalition”, the pacing, the politics, the coaching, and the external communication and support needed to make a change enter practice deeply and be sustainable. It includes the subtle behind-the-scenes conversations with individuals and the public forums and moves in decision-making bodies. It also includes communication skills that form the DNA of successful leadership like stopping climbs up the ladder of inference, active listening, and the teachable skills associated with having difficult conversations.

9. Adult Professional culture

Leaders learn how to build norms and relationships among adults characterized by the 12 elements in my chapter on [Adult Professional Culture](#). They can establish trust in themselves and trust among staff members that enable the development of the 12 elements described, especially in Common Planning Time Teams.

10. Early childhood teamwork

Preventing the learning gaps that occur in the lives of underserved children P-3 can prevent the cumulative gaps that become so entrenched by 8th grade. Thus elementary schools (and the central office officers who hire and develop them) cry out for people who become knowledgeable about ECE in literacy and numeracy, or who at least recognize the components that can fuse to eliminate those early gaps.

Such building Leaders learn how to develop Common Planning Time teams that operate with the simultaneous presence of seven factors that the best coaching programs like that of Momenta



(Momenta.org) combine in supporting ECE educators. These factors mutually reinforce one another. They are: 1) high-expertise literacy and generic instructional strategies, 2) with regular individual data analysis of individual student's progress, 3) modeling and leadership from the principal on non-defensive examination of results in relation to teaching practices, 4) differentiated instruction for students at learning stations and in teacher-led instructional groups, 5) goal setting for students, 6) adult commitment to belief, manifested in daily behavior, in all students' capacity to learn to proficiency, 7) adults who believe they can improve their teaching.

Individual programs exist around the country that already accomplish all 7 of these outcomes. Observing them at work is how we have constructed the list above. They are proven to get startling results. Disrupting racism and teaching for equity is particularly central to implementing such literacy programs effectively.

Jon Saphier is the Founder and President of Research for Better Teaching, Inc., a professional development organization dedicated since 1979 to improving classroom teaching and school leadership throughout the United States and internationally. For the past 40 years, he and his RBT colleagues have taught in-depth professional development programs centered on the knowledge base of teaching to educators in more than 200 school districts each year in the United States and other countries. Visit www.RBTeach.com to learn more about Research For Better Teaching

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Addendum - We want the curriculum on leadership to provide, amongst other important items, the following:

LEADERSHIP FOR HIGH-EXPERTISE TEACHING

COMMON LANGUAGE AND CONCEPT SYSTEM



Leaders need to create for their faculties common images of what good teaching is. So lay out for principals in drill-down detail what the most important elements of generic pedagogy look and sound like, and create a common language and concept system for talking about them. Generic pedagogy includes some surprising items: knowing the logical learning progressions with the particular content one teaches (that's far beyond "knowing the content"), personal relationship building with students, developing partnerships with families....and many, many more items that are generic).

OBSERVATION

Show principals how to describe in significant detail what an observed teacher is doing and what impact those actions are having on student learning. This includes good planning and its consequences as well as poor planning and its consequences. We can show principals how to do that with credibility because of what they learn about the important things to look for and how to get evidence of what is happening.

.....AND FEEDBACK TO TEACHERS

Differential Conferencing

Develop principal skill at choosing high-leverage topics to talk about with teachers from all they have data about, so as to make the conferences result in teacher growth. This includes deciding appropriately for individual teachers who makes the agenda for the conversation and why that is the best choice.

LEADERSHIP FOR STRONG ADULT PROFESSIONAL CULTURES

Show principals how to develop trust in them and relational trust amongst team members. That is the foundation of a strong culture. Then go on the show building leaders concretely through nuts and bolts work together with their faculty on how to develop the 12 validated norms of a strong culture. It's through daily behavior while doing the work that the culture is opened up and strengthened. (See "Vulnerability and Strength at the Same Time".) Nothing against "trust falls" in the woods, but it's a good deal more than that.

COMMON PLANNING TIME TEAMS

Show principals what high-performing teams in their buildings would look like and sound like. We can then show principals how to *act* as intervention and support agents to their common planning time teams, so the members learn to act non-defensively with one another and spend their time in the highest priority ways to impact student learning. These ways include: 1) designing common lessons and formative assessments, 2) doing error analysis of recent student work so as to design together re-teaching to students who didn't get it the first time around.

