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Equity Messaging Guidance for Districts

Affirming Your Commitment to Create Equitable, Just and Thriving Schools for Everyone

November 2021

This page is intended to support districts in communication and engagement related to your diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. We recognize that your work is under increased scrutiny and potential controversy, and we hope this helps you to be clear, transparent, and unapologetic in your commitment to creating equitable, just, and thriving schools for **all** of the young people in your district. Feel free to adapt any of this content for your own community's needs.

Is Critical Race Theory (CRT) In Our District?

- **Every student deserves a quality school that is fair and inclusive.** While we are not explicitly teaching or promoting CRT curriculum, our school district and community is strongly committed to eliminating barriers to every student having what they need, when they need it - that is the core function of equity.
- We will continue to work to eliminate the predictability of success that is currently correlated with race, gender-identity, sexual orientation, wealth, zip code, immigration status, etc. We seek to create a school system that gives all our students the opportunity to develop their academic skills, social-emotional wellness and intelligence, and a sense of agency and civic responsibility.
- We have a moral imperative to not look away from the impacts of harmful structures, policies and practices that limit opportunity for our school community. Every child and family in our district is deserving of learning conditions that foster intellectual curiosity and social and emotional wellbeing.
- Our district's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts include:
 - **Share concrete and inspirational examples of recent and ongoing efforts at the micro- and macro- levels**
 - **Share examples or stories from your community (especially from BIPOC youth and their families) of the impacts of these efforts**

Why Does Our District Need to Focus on Equity/Anti-Racism/Inclusion? Isn't it Divisive?

- Race remains one of the most powerful predictors of how one fares in our public institutions. Persistent racialized outcomes and experiences in the U.S. public education, including in our district, are well documented. We cannot realize our vision of being an effective and thriving school system without eliminating policies and practices that limit opportunity and cause harm.

- It is critically important that we learn about how race, racism, and bias of all forms have shaped and continue to influence decision making in every area of schooling including the curriculum we select, who we hire, how we think about and implement discipline policies, and how we relate to one another. This work is **not** to lay blame, but to create policies, practices, and ways of working that ensures the healthy learning and development of all young people.
- It's important that students see themselves represented in curricula whatever the subject matter - the science of whole child development shows context and meaning-making are fundamental elements of teaching and learning (Cantor, et al. 2021). When young people see themselves, their histories and culture represented in the curriculum, they're more engaged, they feel a sense of belonging, and they're more able to learn.
- We can create the conditions necessary for all our students to thrive. Our Black students, Indigenous students, Students of Color and white students, our queer and trans students, our youth with disabilities, our English language learners - they all deserve schools that are committed to their wellbeing and academic success.
- When we focus on equity, we expand our community's notions of who belongs, and who schooling is intended to work for, to include and care for everyone. By respecting and bridging our differences in ways that help us heal from harm, we can ensure that every child is seen, valued, and thrives.
- We need each other; our fates and futures as a community and society are inextricably linked despite our perceived differences. All of us (*students, parents/caregivers, teachers, principals, district leadership and school board*) must work together in mutually respectful relationships across differences to create the kinds of learning experiences and outcomes all of our young people deserve.
- Teaching and modeling for our students how to authentically connect across difference, and how to stay at the table together in the face of uncertain or complex dynamics, is critical for our global economy and collective future. We have an obligation to our students and to not turn away from difficult conversations and decisions.

Does this work cause harm for White students? Will our White students and families be victimized?

- **Anti-racism is not code for anti-white.** We are committed to teaching truthful and accurate history and to support our young people to make meaning (in age appropriate ways) of our nation's complex past and of the present unfolding all around them. Curriculums and textbooks that only portray white people as either hero or villain are as inaccurate as the omissions of the histories and contributions of people of color. Our past is interconnected; there is pain and hope in our understanding and there are lessons that help us think about how to be a part of a shared future where there is more opportunity and community for all of us.

What does brain research and the science of learning say about our need to ensure culturally inclusive, anti-racist environments?

The [Science of Learning & Development \(SoLD\) Alliance](#) frequently shares the latest research on whole child development, neuroscience, and social-emotional learning. In particular, the SoLD Alliance has shared these [Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action](#) focusing on these five Guiding Principles (Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children, 2021):

- *Positive Developmental Relationships*

- *Environments Filled With Safety and Belonging*
- *Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development*
- *Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets*
- *Integrated Support Systems*

The brain is a prediction machine that loves order; it is calm when things are orderly and gets unsettled when it does not know what is coming next. Learning communities that have shared values, routines, and high expectations—that demonstrate cultural sensitivity and communicate worth—create calm and ignite the part of the brain that loves novelty and is curious. Children are more able to learn and take risks when they feel not only physically safe with consistent routines and order, but also emotionally and identity safe, such that they and their culture are a valued part of the community they are in.

In contrast, anxiety and toxic stress are created by negative stereotypes and biases, bullying or microaggressions, unfair discipline practices, and other exclusionary or shaming practices. These are impediments to learning because they preoccupy the brain with worry and fear. Instead, co-creating norms; enabling students to take agency in their learning and contribute to the community; and having predictable, fair, and consistent routines and expectations for all community members create a strong sense of belonging. (Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children, 2021).

The need for inclusive, culturally responsive and affirming schools, classrooms, and curriculum is embedded throughout these principles. Positive developmental relationships (between students and teachers; teachers and families; as well as among the adults within our school system and throughout our community) all require shared attention to and understanding of bias and cultural difference.



Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B. J., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. From [*Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*](#).

Practical Tips for Engagement

- **Don't accept the premise of the question: while CRT is in the forefront, its detractors are actually targeting a wide range of equity and inclusion efforts. If we agree that every student deserves a school that is fair and inclusive, these efforts are critical.**

- We're *actually* talking about our equity and inclusion work. Example: *"I've never studied critical race theory and it isn't something that we use. I think we're actually talking about our **equity and inclusion** work. That is something that we have been **proud** to be working on for many years. Let me share why we began that work, what that has involved and the impact that we've seen."*
- Equity and inclusion is **critical** for 21st Century & Deeper Learning.
- We may disagree about the best way to get there, **but do we agree that every student deserves a school that is fair and inclusive?**
- **Reframe the narrative:** maintain focus on the "*why*" of your inclusive vision of education. Engage and activate your community in support of your equity/DEI strategies. Proactively celebrate what you are doing as a community committed to equity and inclusion.
 - Just telling people what we're *NOT* doing puts us in a defensive position that doesn't inspire or activate the broader community.
 - No matter who is asking the question, remember to speak to the majority of your community that agrees that schools should be fair and inclusive
 - Don't spend time talking about what you're not doing. Instead focus on the *WHY* for your inclusive vision of education.
 - Inspire, engage and activate your community in support of your Equity/DEI strategy
 - Proactively celebrate what you are doing as a community committed to equity and inclusion.
 - **Invite everyone to join in this work.**
- **Build upon your current equity/DEI strategy efforts as the foundation:** we are being dared to say what we are up to, and we should say clearly and proudly that we are committed to a fair and inclusive education for every student.
 - What does our data tell us about who's thriving and who's struggling in our district? How is that connected to broader patterns in our state and the nation?

- What have students and families, especially those most negatively impacted by the status quo, told us about their experience and needs?
- What have we learned about how historic explicit discrimination in education (especially in our specific context) has shaped the design of our systems in conflict with our values?
- How do we move beyond just focusing on individual actions and intentions to understanding how our systems need to change?
- **Lead with empathy / listen to students:** At the core of chronic inequity is a lack of empathy for students and families who are most negatively impacted in our systems. Student voice and leadership is one of the most compelling ways to make the case for change. It is important to hear from students who reflect the full diversity of our school communities - **including those who have concerns about our equity and inclusion work.**
- **Reject the us vs. them / zero-sum narrative: We can meet the needs of each student without sacrificing the needs of another student.**
 - Research shows when we redesign education to address the needs of a specific group, many other student groups benefit (Burke et al. 2016).
 - For example, special education practices benefit students with special needs AND students with different learning styles
 - In our global society our fates are increasingly linked and require greater understanding and collaboration across difference
 - Share the wealth of learning science, child development and economic evidence of the benefits of equity and inclusion for every child
- **This is a work in progress:** Achieving equity and inclusion in our schools is hard and complex work. We aren't perfect and there's a lot for us to learn and figure out together. We must stay together on this road to equity and inclusion.
- **Be prepared with proactive and reactive moves:**
 - **Proactive Examples**
 - Hold small group student discussions and living room "coffees" with all parts of the district community to make the case for the district's

Equity/DEI strategy

- Engage in a listening tour to build a bank of student quotes and stories
 - Identify and build relationships with influential leaders that represent all parts of the district community that can be “bridge builders”.
- **Reactive Examples**
 - Consistently reframe the conversation back to what the district is doing as part of its Equity/DEI strategy
 - Always be prepared with inspirational materials for the district’s “Why” and data for it’s Equity/DEI strategy
 - Name that all change is hard and emotional and that your district is committed to bringing different groups and perspectives together to find ways to meet every student’s needs.

- **Engage and prepare your school board:**

- Proactively review the district’s Equity/DEI strategy, supporting data, impact data and connections to state and federal accountability. Support all board members to speak to these efforts.
- Share empathy building quotes and stories from students who reflect the diversity of the district, especially those most negatively impacted
- Co-create an inspiring narrative about the “Why” for the district’s Equity/DEI strategy and how it is designed to provide fair and inclusive education for every child
- Map the different perspectives and expectations from many types of groups that make up the district community including students, families, staff and partners, and supporting them to embrace the complexity of their responsibility to balance those various needs.

References

Burke, S. Borquaye, Y., Freeman, B., Hehir, T., Grindal, T., Lamoreau, R. (2016). *A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education*. http://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf

Cantor, P., Chase, P., Gomperts, N., Lerner, R., Pittman, K. (2021). *Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving: A Dynamic Systems Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children. (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.

https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/SoLD_Design_Principles_REPORT.pdf

Additional Resources

- [Recorded Webinar: Leading With Courage and Commitment, Reclaiming the Narrative for Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Schools \(November 2021\)](#)
- [Building Anti-Racist Schools Amidst Backlash: A Conversation with Kathleen Osta](#)
- [The Curbcut Effect and Championing Equity](#)
- [Race Forward: Counter-Narrating the Attacks on Critical Race Theory](#)
- [Embracing Pleasure, Fractal Responsibility, and the Power of Our Imagination, podcast with adrienne maree brown](#)
- [LiberatoryDesign.com](#)
- [Bridging & Breaking](#)
- [Simple Tips for Engaging with the Educational Equity Backlash](#)

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