How to Start Equity Work in Your School

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This month, I had the opportunity to be a <u>presenter</u> for the Keep Indiana Learning Summer Conference. My presentation was called "Embracing Equity to Strive Towards Excellence." There are many school leaders who are now beginning equity work or are in the early stages of the work but aren't sure how to do the work or move the work forward. The work can be hard, but the process is straightforward.

There are several steps that participants need to take when engaging in equity work. The first step is accessing the why. After the death of George Floyd and social justice protests around the world, some school leaders felt compelled to release statements affirming that Black lives matter, explained how their schools were safe places, and even announced the addition of an equity, diversity, and inclusion officer. Although fear can be a motivator, my hope is there is a deeper reason rather than public pressure or fear of being called out by parents, students, or the community. My hope is that educators want every child to succeed. Self-work is the most important part of the work. Reflection, rethinking, and revising will be part of equity work and this includes individual work as well as collective work.

Once the why is identified, equity needs to be defined. My sons attended a resilience camp and met Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera, MSDWT Director of Equity and Inclusion. She was a guest speaker and talked to them about equity. When I asked them what they learned, they said, "Equity is making sure everyone has what they need to be successful." My twin sons will enter 5th grade next year. This equity definition was simple enough for elementary students to understand. Once there is a common and simple definition agreed upon, a team needs to be developed.

Equity work is not a solo act. It will not be successful or as impactful if it is done alone; a team is needed. The team should include parents, students, certified and classified staff, district and building administrators, community members, and community partners. Each one of these stakeholders has an important lens that needs to be considered. I frequently see students missing from the work. This is problematic since they are the center of the work and have valuable insight about what they need.

Next, you need to determine when the group will meet and have a plan to reschedule meetings if that is necessary. Failure to reschedule canceled meetings could be seen as a lack of commitment for change. At the first meeting, participants need the freedom to express concerns and areas where they believe there are equity issues. Equity issues are not always race-based. For example, when I was an elementary librarian, the bookshelves were moved to accommodate wheelchairs. Students who used wheelchairs did not have the same access to books because of how the bookshelves were.

At the next meeting, a vision and mission should be determined. School districts typically have a vision and mission so the group's mission and vision should align with the district's mission and vision. The mission and vision will explain the purpose; the name of the group does not need that. Through my education consulting work, I am serving a rural school district in southeastern Indiana. The words diversity, equity, and inclusion are not in the title of a group I am supporting, nor is it in the title of a group I am part of as a parent in Indianapolis. This is not the time for wordplay. The focus should be on clear articulation in the mission and vision and in the actions that the group takes to ensure all students can strive towards and achieve excellence.

The third meeting should be focused on narrowing down the list of concerns to no more than three focus areas. With those focus areas, targets should be identified for accountability purposes. What are the goals that need to be achieved through the equity work and how will

they be measured? Next, this information needs to be clearly communicated with all stakeholders on a consistent basis.

This is just how to get started, but this work needs to be maintained. I am glad I have the opportunity to help educators and schools with this work. Remember, this work is important so all students get what they need to be successful learners.