



In Chicago, listening is the first step toward equity

BY MAURICE SWINNEY

When the Chicago Public Schools' Office of Equity was established in September 2018, our goal was to take a systemic approach to building equity so that every student would have access to a high-quality education, regardless of race, ZIP code, ability, or country of origin.

We knew that this goal could not be achieved through a series of stand-alone initiatives. Equity must be the core value that informs every decision we make, from capital improvements to curriculum design, and it requires

attention from every member of our staff, schools, and communities.

When I was asked to share our district's journey toward systemic equity in *The Learning Professional*, I initially thought I would focus on the rollout of the Chicago Public Schools' Equity Framework, the backbone of the Office of Equity's support to schools. It outlines a set of shared understandings, language, processes, and tools for supporting our students and communities, especially those most impacted by inequity.

But the work of making equity systemic in our district really began

before the framework was complete. And it did not begin with the implementation of an initiative or policy. It started with our team's behavior — how we showed up and how we listened. That story is one we want to tell as other districts begin their own equity journeys.

LOOKING INWARD

Equity work starts with us as individuals. It starts with us looking inward to understand our own — often unconscious — beliefs and biases that define how we show up in different spaces. To help us understand

ourselves, we have to begin by listening to others.

In Chicago Public Schools, we started with facilitated conversations among colleagues to understand each other and our shared goals before beginning the search for solutions. Then we committed to listening to our community.

Over the course of the Office of Equity's first nine months, my colleagues and I were in conversation with 5,000 district stakeholders — teachers, parents, and students. We wanted to hear about their experiences, needs, and wants, especially among those furthest from opportunity.

This meant asking the questions and holding space for them to respond honestly and sometimes with a lot of emotion. It meant hearing difficult things about people's lived experiences in our city and our schools. It meant our staff needed to cultivate and maintain a mindset that allowed them to listen to others' experiences and viewpoints without reacting. Only then could we integrate those learnings into the evolving framework in a way that would help transform students' lives in the future.

In the field, we call this kind of work liberatory thinking. Liberatory thinking involves looking inward to question and interrupt one's assumptions and beliefs about others and their capabilities. That process can then inform the actions we take

and opportunities we create for others. For example, it can help us develop goals and statements of purpose, build relationships in affinity and across difference, create safe and brave spaces for dialogue, and rethink the data we collect and how we use it.

Engaging in liberatory thinking is like the work a gardener does in the fall to ready the soil and plant bulbs to enjoy beautiful blooms in the spring. When we invest in the initial, personal work of liberatory thinking, we are laying the groundwork for advancing equity in the future. But when we choose not to do this initial work, any new policies or initiatives that we implement will not blossom because we haven't properly prepared our environment to be a place where equity can flourish.

SHIFTING MINDSETS

Beginning with ourselves and our colleagues can seem like a big shift in how we think about creating change in our schools, and it is. It requires a level of self-reflection and vulnerability that we, as educators, might not be used to providing.

It is essential for everyone working on equity to cultivate a disposition that enables them to keep their minds curious and reserve judgment. Part of being successful in equity work is being able to view situations from an objective, neutral point of view that sees and acknowledges but does not

THE EQUITY CURVE IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

C = CURIOUS. Withhold judgment and be in a space of inquiry. Be curious to gain a better understanding of an issue.

U = URGENCY. Work with a sense of urgency when championing the success of our students. We have to respond in a timely manner.

R = RESILIENCY. Acknowledge that this work can be difficult and requires resiliency.

V = VULNERABLE. Recognize that each of us may not know a solution, but we can be vulnerable to collectively learn and problem-solve together.

E = EMPATHY. Build connection. Show empathy across differences, with someone you think may not share your experiences.

judge. When we find ourselves making judgments, our minds are in a fixed state, and we are not open to different perspectives.

To help us establish such mindsets, we centered the Chicago Public Schools Equity Framework around something we call the equity curve. CURVE stands for five components we all need to establish to do this work well: curiosity, urgency, resiliency, vulnerability, and empathy. (See box above.)

The equity curve is a tool for holding space to reflect on one's disposition in a given moment. It helps us be not only reflective but also compassionate with ourselves and with

others, which is a necessary condition of equity work.

In practice, we use it as a norming device to help all of us show up in equity conversations in a way that is helpful, productive, and nonjudgmental. For example, we use it to guide reflection exercises and grounding conversations.

ESTABLISHING COMMON GOALS

Once we do the personal, inner work that prepares us to successfully engage in equity work, we can engage in designing the framework that will help us advance equity in our specific context. Our listening tour helped us understand the importance of rooting the Equity Framework in targeted universalism, an approach that establishes common goals for the whole community but distinct pathways to reaching those common goals for different groups with different needs, with particular focus on those who are furthest from opportunity (powell et al., 2019).

One of the strengths of targeted universalism is the way it brings a community together, focusing on ensuring that everyone gets what they need without appearing to cater to special interests or get mired in politics.

In Chicago Public Schools, the targeted universalism approach organizes the district around common outcome goals, and then once we understand, based on quantitative and qualitative data, where all students stand in relation to meeting the goals, we can begin to focus our work on short- and long-term targeted solutions that will help all students achieve the goal. We lead with the students who are furthest from reaching the goals. (See box above). Too often in education, we begin by developing policies or initiatives intended to solve very real and pressing issues, without fully acknowledging the social and cultural context that led to those conditions. Or, we may name aspects of the context without acknowledging the myriad ways they play out in ours and our students’ lives.

A targeted universalism approach

TARGETED UNIVERSALISM IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To build equity, we must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Targeted universalism helps us establish common goals for all students with different pathways to help students with different needs reach those common goals. For example, a high school that sets a universal goal of 95% graduation for all students examines how student groups (based on race, gender, gender expression, economic disadvantage, or diverse learning needs) are positioned to reach that goal. Here are sample questions that can help us better understand what all students need to reach that goal. We consider intersectionalities, such as race and gender, in addressing these questions:

- What are the current graduation rates for each student group?
- What are the factors internal and external to the school that affect the experiences of different groups?
- What are the neighborhood assets and challenges where students live, and how might those affect their experiences inside or outside of school?
- What are the different conditions and resources necessary for each student group to thrive?
- What policies benefit or burden each student group?

Source: Chicago Public Schools. (n.d.). *Chicago Public Schools Equity Framework*. bit.ly/3CnzV42

addresses those common challenges by calling for an ongoing process of collaborative inquiry to prioritize and understand equity challenges from multiple perspectives and then create solutions informed by those multiple perspectives.

STAYING THE COURSE

These steps of examining our own beliefs, listening to others, and establishing collective goals lay the foundation for us to take equity-centered actions. Those actions include, but are not limited to, directing resources equitably and designing fair policies and systems.

This work takes time. It is incremental, and it cannot be rushed to adhere to external timetables for measuring outcomes. Because making shifts toward equity is deeply rooted in school culture and climate, we must stop the familiar pendulum swing from one reform to the next. That pattern, which is all too common in schools, keeps us from making deep change. It also leads to fatigue and cynicism.

Doing the work of building equity is challenging and requires

us to maintain patience and grace. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of beginning equity work is being comfortable with not being told the answer. In fact, in many cases, it means being comfortable accepting that we might never know all the answers or that we will do much work and still have farther to go.

Living in this space can feel very uncomfortable, but it is an essential condition of equity work and fundamentally important for all of our students to be successful.

REFERENCE

powell, j., Menendian, S., & Ake, W. (2019). *Targeted universalism: Policy & practice*. Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. University of California, Berkeley. berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism

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