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WEBINAR 2 SUMMARY: NEW VISIONS FOR REACHING STUDENTS

Dr. Susan Enfield, Superintendent, Highline Public Schools, WA

Dr. Shaun Nelms, Superintendent, East High School Rochester City School District, NY

Dr. Candace Singh, Superintendent, Fallbrook Union Elementary School District, CA

Discovery Education *Equity Talks* is a live webinar series featuring our nation's top educational leaders with a focus on cultivating equity and excellence. Moderated by Dr. Luvelle Brown – superintendent of Ithaca City School District – these 45-minute segments are designed to provide guidance and support to educators across the country and internationally who are struggling with issues of equity that, while always a topic of concern, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide civil unrest, and the need to rely on remote and hybrid learning.

Summary

The panelists began their discussion by sharing what was on their minds, primarily expressing concern for their students: those they are not reaching, those who are struggling in a myriad of ways, and those with whom they have not had successful engagement. They discussed the digital divide as a fundamental equity issue that adds to the institutional barriers which already preclude quality education for all students. They also noted that issues of equity were present in many school systems before the pandemic, observing that we have accepted a "normalized-failure perspective."

Panelists discussed specifically how the current moment offers opportunities to genuinely inspire students and to invite them to be active participants in their education. The importance of building authentic relationships with students, ones in which every student is seen, heard, and respected at school, resonated throughout the conversation. Students also must have autonomy, choice, and voice in what they learn; they must feel their learning is relevant to their individual lives. Panelists discussed the need for educators to explore their own biases and privileges, examining how those biases might negatively influence efforts to provide students equitable educations. They must ensure they do not pity students, that they embrace setting the bar high for all students, engaging them in learning that is worthy of their intellect and worth their time. One panelist

shared the need to involve the community members, many of whom may be "context experts." School systems must involve and embrace the community, especially to help understand what students need and to provide them education that is tailored to those needs.

When asked to share practical ways of engaging students in digital learning, the panelists emphasized making and sustaining connections with students as their primary strategy. One panelist shared that, in her district, teachers are expected to call each of their students every week – personal contact emphasized over academic learning. In many instances, staff helped identify students in need of support and built those networks (e.g., for a student caring for a younger sibling while also caring for parent sick with COVID-19, the school supplied food, counselors, and fostered engagement of other family members). The panelists urged staff to avoid complacency and to keep reaching out to students even when multiple attempts had failed. For students with special needs, panelists shared the importance of holding support service providers accountable for supporting the new digital curriculums and having regular check-ins with staff and students. Furthermore, panelists shared that, regardless of the type of learning delivery, online or in-person, highly effective principals were crucial to success. They must lead with high expectations focused on the fundamental value of equity for all students and deliver accordingly, practicing distributive leadership to make equity a reality..

Panelists view the pandemic as a time for transformation. It's time now to examine and reject accepted norms when necessary. Being steadfast, courageous, and ready to push back on practices that are not serving all students leads to success for everyone. When asked for one thing people can do tomorrow to transform education, panelists said:

1) Challenge yourself to identify one thing you know is in the way of students' success and attack it.

2) Envision the circumstances you want to be present in educational settings in the future, and make a plan to see them instituted.

3) Make *heart* work, not *hard* work – through building relationships and understanding, engaging the community, and practicing distributive leadership.

Pertinent Quotes

- "The DNA for the system is a promise to deliver equity!"

- "It's about the heart of a child and a young person. When they feel connected to the adult and they know someone cares about them, they are more likely to engage with us, and they are more likely to engage in the work. Otherwise, work is just not going to happen."

- "We have taken a normalized-failure perspective. The 'now norm' has to embrace who the context experts are and not the content. We need to dip into the community for the experts."

- "We need to provide help that respects them and does not pity them – Have to keep that bar high!"

- "Heart work, not hard work."

Additional Questions/Commentary

- How are you providing your teachers with the PD/coaching they need to help their students succeed with virtual learning?

- Equity and mental health are so closely tied together. What suggestions might panelists have for ensuring that we are being equitable in our social-emotional support of students? For example, to what extent do we resort to discipline practices that negatively affect some groups of students and which don't provide the support they need? We will need to consider this more than ever when we return to school.

- How might schools adjust the 7am-3pm paradigm to better support working parents while strengthening the learning experience for students?

- Can someone speak to structures we might establish to ensure equity for students with disabilities?

- How do we help students explore the systemic racism behind the digital divide and the disproportionately negative effect of Covid-19 on communities of color? Then, how do we empower students to organize, resist, and build a more equitable society?

Resources for Consideration

- Center for Urban Education Success. (n.d.). *Distributed leadership*. Warner school of education nationwide – University of Rochester https://www.rochester.edu/warner/cues/distributed-leadership/

- Highline Public Schools. (2019, November). *Procedure 0010 P2 – Institutional practices*. Highline Public Schools. https://www.highlineschools.org/about/board-policies/policy-details/~board/board-policies/post/procedure-0010-p2-institutional-practices

- Center for Urban Education Success. (n.d.). *Center for urban education success - Supporting the ur-east high partnership and urban schools*. Warner school of education nationwide – University of Rochester. https://www.rochester.edu/warner/cues/