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WEBINAR 7 SUMMARY: RE-EXAMINING OUR SCHOOLS AS POTENTIAL SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

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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

This webinar emphasized linking nationwide protests to inequities in education. The killing of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) by police represents a physical manifestation of centuries of systemic oppression in the United States. Protests continue because the same injustices are stuck in a time loop. George Floyd and others died because of persistent structures of White supremacy, and those structures resemble the systems that are perpetuated and experienced by many students in schools. Panelists explored the extent to which the foundation of our schools is built

on White fragility and middle-class politeness.

The pandemic, like the focus on police brutality, has uncovered persistent inequities and made them visible to all. Because of the pandemic, panelists suggested, anti-marginalization work has stopped because school buildings are closed. Schools provide essential services that work against oppression but have been disrupted during the pandemic, such as behavioral health interventions and meal services. Now that schools have been exposed as potentially weak support systems that cannot endure a hardship like the pandemic, systems must reimagine policy and practice.

Administrators, staff, and educators must promote policies that create equity. First, they must examine how policies are currently structured. For example, in policies regarding superintendents, the superintendent is typically referred to as “he,” language that helps to normalize and uphold systems of oppression, in this case cis-gendered patriarchal oppression. District members can also evaluate practices that inhibit equity, such as purchasing practices. Some districts have already begun examining their relationships with police departments – a system that can expose children to the justice system because of non-violent crimes or minor infractions, like defying a teacher in class. An important consideration for all education systems is establishing an anti-marginalizing curriculum, such as those with inclusive history books. Academics can stop using assimilationist language like the “achievement gap” and move towards antiracist language like the “opportunity gap.” All actors must be as intentional as possible about disrupting oppressive systems.

An important part of disrupting those oppressive systems, panelists noted, is examining budgets. Budgets must see, hear, and affirm all people’s children. Equity does not mean equal. It does not mean we fund all programs at the exact same rate; it means we provide funding at a rate that ensures that students are successful, such as ensuring that all students graduate. Methods such as the Equity Index can help districts prioritize their budgets in a way that benefits the most vulnerable students and offers a concrete way to dismantle oppressive systems. Community involvement should be a factor in all decisions, including budgets. We need to bring as many students, parents, community members, and staff to the table as possible.

Moving forward, a huge consideration for school boards is evaluating current standards. If we are not intentional about standards and accountability, we will perpetuate the same failing systems. If an employee does not meet the standards, we must help that person find a “graceful exit.” If the superintendent is not willing to examine standards of excellence, then other stakeholders must be courageous and push the dialogue forward. There must be pressure to institutionalize equity.

Pertinent Quotes

- “Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential; social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy.”
- “If we treated Black lives with the same fragility [as] we treat White fear, our schools would be a space of liberation.”
- “Wherever there are systems of power there are systems of oppression. If you’re neutral in situations of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

Additional Questions/Commentary

- How do we begin antiracist training, or other mindset-based training, for all administrators, staff, and educators?
- How can we translate antiracist or bias training to policies?
- How do we promote courageous conversations between schools and families, and schools and students?

Resources for Consideration

- Busch, J. (2020, July 24). *South L.A. students win campaign for equity at LAUSD school board* [Press release]. <http://cocosouthla.org/south-l-a-students-win-campaign-for-equity-at-laUSD-school-board/>
- Ryssdal, K., & Wood, M. (Hosts). (2020, June 2). Will the George Floyd protests finally catalyze real change? (No. 205) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Make Me Smart*. Minnesota Public Radio. <https://www.marketplace.org/shows/make-me-smart-with-kai-and-molly/will-the-george-floyd-protests-finally-catalyze-real-change/>
- Eberhardt, J. L. (2020). *Biased: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see, think, and do*. Penguin Books.