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WEBINAR 4 SUMMARY: EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD IN A TIME OF LOSS

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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 addressing students' unique needs, particularly those related to social-emotional health and those of students who were underserved before the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of this webinar, participants shared the difficulties their constituents faced in terms of loss of life and exacerbated racism. They considered how to better serve students despite zip code, life circumstances, or parental background. Panelists acknowledged weaknesses in reaching many students in terms of service and connectivity during the pandemic and the need for action in light of these realizations.

Panelists related the diverse experiences students have had during the pandemic. Some students are doing better at home where they can engage with a culturally responsive curriculum that validates their identity, such as learning about social justice issues by watching Black Panther. On the other hand, some students are now stuck at home without the resources they need to learn (e.g., computer, internet), without food, or even without basic safety (e.g., proper healthcare, relief from abusers). Panelists agreed that systems need to think about how they will address these traumas when students return and approach school through a healing-centered lens. Leaders of school districts also need to

think about how to ensure that curricula are antiracist and culturally responsive, so students feel as validated in school as they do at home. We have decided in our country, participants noted, that a racial hierarchy decides who gets to live and who must die. We must be careful that “we aren’t prioritizing privilege.” Attention must be given to educating the whole child and to educating all children. We need to make sure that those who are most underserved are at the center of what we do next.

The discussion highlighted that what we have lost during this time may be what people need most: human touch and one-on-one connection. Panelists noted a dangerous pattern of cutting off meaningful conversation around negative emotions. They mentioned that, so often, we do not know how to respond to students who tell us “I’m not doing well” or students who express their trauma. Social-emotional learning (SEL) needs to be implemented in the traditional curriculum (e.g., reading, mathematics). We need to create a space for self-care, healing, and liberation, and we need to be cautious about how we approach this. Too often we impose what we think is right, but instead we should engage the community and figure out needs from that perspective.

The conversation acknowledged the extent of academic loss since March when most schools made the transition to distance learning, which, of course, is not the same as face-to-face learning, and the structures were not in place for all students to participate. When considering the return to school buildings, participants reiterated that questions remain about what transportation, cafeteria time, and classroom sizes will look like. Parents are uncertain about sending their children into crowded spaces, and staff are hesitant as well. Students need spaces where they feel like they belong – where they feel like they are enough. Systems must support educational priorities like literacy. In short, all stakeholders need to be graceful

and patient as we plan and revise and improvise – we need to lift the voices of students who have been disenfranchised in order to determine how to make them feel safe and supported.

Pertinent Quotes

- “If we don’t do SEL within an equity and racial justice context, very easily SEL can become White supremacy with a smile.”
- “If you can be uncomfortable for the five minutes that I am speaking, then consider that a blessing. It’s through discomfort that we grow.”

Additional Questions/Commentary

- How do we support entire families so that students can thrive?
- How can we leverage parents to create culturally responsive curricula?
- How can we leverage established online schools to support transitioning schools?
- How do we move away from test culture towards more equitable assessments?