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SEASON 2 | WEBINAR 1: COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

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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 Equity Talk kicked off Season 2 of Discovery Education's Equity Talks webinar series and was the first webinar since students returned to school (either face-to-face, remote, or hybrid). The four superintendents discussed their experiences – challenges and lessons learned – as schools opened in fall 2020. Issues of social justice also were at the discussion's forefront, especially because Portland, OR continues to navigate protests, in addition to contending with compromised air quality caused by the wildfires on the west coast.

Dr. Luvelle Brown, facilitator for this Equity Talk and superintendent of Ithaca Public Schools, began the discussion by explaining that superintendents

have become "the face of COVID in the community." He said that many governors "pushed off decisions to the superintendents," and families rely on district leadership to answer their questions. Dr. Brown asked the panelists to share their experiences in their communities and, particularly, what it is like to be a superintendent of color, especially as superintendents engage in conversations about inequities.

Superintendents agreed that school districts have the responsibility to both educate children and to ensure their other needs are met. Over the past several months, Portland, OR has faced many unique challenges that impact children and youth: In addition to Covid 19, communities have seen social justice protests and faced air

quality issues. Youth across the city have made their voices heard on issues of social justice – in the midst of the wildfires that consumed areas of the coast. For one week, Portland had the world’s worst air quality. These issues exacerbated the health and economic concerns caused by COVID-19 and its disproportionate impact on students of color. The superintendents emphasized that “school system leaders are tasked with making prudent, rational decisions as we try to maintain a continuity of learning.” As community leaders, superintendents also are in the forefront of racial equity conversations.

While discussing this question, the superintendents also talked about the inequities in education which have always existed and how the pandemic brought them to light. The phrase “leading in permanent white water” was used to describe the situation in which superintendents find themselves. They must navigate the chaos by acknowledging the challenges they face while attending to the needs of each individual student, making school leaders feel as if they are trying to steer a pitching vessel through raging surf.

The panelists reminded everyone that superintendents are instructional leaders, but they are also responsible for taking care of the physical, psychological, social/emotional, and safety needs of students and teachers. Ensuring teachers’ social/emotional well-being and self-care is also key to a district’s success. As a superintendent explained, to retain teachers, the leadership must give them what they need, both professionally and personally.

Addressing the second part of the question about how superintendents of color can address these challenges, one of the superintendents said that they need to bring their passion to their work. Even when they are frustrated and angry, they must continue to share their passion and compassion, a notion that is particularly true for female superintendents, as one of the superintendents pointed out. Although education is a female-dominated profession, leadership roles still tend to be held by men.

The next question posed by the facilitator was “What are some of the policy shifts that are affecting you lately?” A key theme that surfaced is the distinct difference between theory and practice in implementing virtual learning that is accessible to everyone. Superintendents emphasized that districts need policies that can be implemented quickly and effectively; there needs to be action behind the words. A superintendent raised several questions that districts should consider when creating equity policies: Can students see themselves reflected in the curriculum materials? Are leaders looking at potential implicit bias in assessments? Are leaders allocating monetary resources to marginalized populations, particularly students of color, English learners, and students receiving special education services? Essentially, the commitment needs to be made to provide personalized learning for each student, and districts need Boards of Education that can truly commit to equity policies.

Next, the superintendents shared specific policies their districts had implemented. The districts that these superintendents represent had begun to develop equity policies prior to COVID-19. For example, Portland developed the *Portland Public Schools reimagined: Preparing Our Students to Lead Change and Improve the World* vision document. It defines a graduate of Portland Public Schools as someone who “will be a compassionate critical thinker, able to collaborate and solve problems, and be prepared to lead a more socially just world.”

Virginia Beach City Public Schools has been working with the community to create a new strategic plan and highlights six goals in its *The Strategic Framework, Compass to 2025*. Each goal has a specific equity emphasis and a strategy for implementation. The district’s goal is to create a benchmark system to document the gaps between their goals and their current status and to make a plan to reach those goals.

Beyond policies, however, the superintendents agreed that they need to examine both policy and culture or what they call “heart work.” The premise behind this idea is to think about the belief

systems that people carry within them regarding other human beings and how that belief system shapes their interactions. A superintendent phrased the question that educators need to address as “What does it mean to be human in our city and our community and our schools?”

The Equity Talks then transitioned to financial issues where the panelists discussed how they were ensuring equity amidst the significant financial issues facing districts. The panelists emphasized the need to be honest in their assessments, especially for the districts which have been dealt a financial blow because of declining tourism. One of the biggest priorities has been to ensure that each student and family has access to Wi-fi and devices. For students lacking access, the districts were able to provide hotspots or work with local internet providers to get them connected. As one superintendent argued, the lack of access to broadband is a federal issue, not just a local community issue. Given the importance of internet access in today’s world, this gap needs to be addressed federally.

Other issues that were raised about funding inequities were concerns about food service and transportation. Because students were on different schedules where some left the school buildings midday, more resources needed to aim at providing transportation. Districts also were able to rely on community organizations to address their needs, especially social/emotional and mental health services. One district created a catalogue of resources that families could use to locate and connect with community services.

During the discussion about budgets, panelists highlighted teachers’ needs as well as students’. One superintendent emphasized the need to provide teachers with as much support as possible. As another superintendent said, “If we are going to be warriors and champions of equity, we have to put our money where our mouth is when it comes to our teachers’ professional development, what they are learning, and what they need.”

The last major topic addressed in this part of the Equity Talk was the inequities that always lingered below the surface but became

visible due COVID-19. One superintendent noted that some families can afford to enroll their students in “pods” during remote learning, where they receive extra time with a teacher to ensure they continue to learn and stay on track while participating in school remotely. Other students may be at home with no extra support, struggling to learn. When the students return to the school buildings together, inequities in student achievement may be exacerbated by the divide created by COVID-19. A superintendent warned leadership that they will need to be prepared to have difficult conversations with their communities about the need to reallocate resources to buildings where students may struggle.

As the Equity Talks ended, the panelists were asked to reflect on two questions. First, they were asked how they are different today than they were in March. Second, they were asked how they would inspire folks to do something different tomorrow. For the first question, the panelists discussed the urgency with which many of these issues need to be addressed, how critical is the need to have these conversations with the communities, and the importance of ensuring that every single day is focused on student success. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to be the voice of advocacy and the model of leadership in the effort to address the inequities.

For the second question about how to inspire other people, the panelists had many ideas. One superintendent spoke about the history of school reform and how schools have been criticized for “failing children,” while, simultaneously, many people are content with the status quo. This superintendent said that everyone needs to be “ready to engage with people who like the status quo,” and that leaders need to be prepared to ask the hard questions about what they like about the strategies they are trying now. What are things they have done that they no longer want to do? What are the new things that they should be doing that they are not doing? Ultimately, the focus needs to be on creating and maintaining relationships with students.

Panelists recommended continued collaboration with local, state, and national

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colleagues. The superintendents had seen evidence of innovations and creativity happening in classrooms, both remote and face-to-face. Educators can learn from one another, particularly as they move to “classrooms without walls.” The superintendents also emphasized the need to listen and be open with the communities because it is a “privilege to serve them.”

The last statement made by a panelist was a powerful one that reminded the audience about the importance of education and why educators need to continue to “fight the good fight” to ensure success for all students. When students succeed, everyone benefits. In the words of the superintendent:

It’s not just about admiring the problem. It’s about solving it. We need to bring the broader community together. It’s about the economic viability of our region and our communities. When our students do well, our cities do well. Our countries do well. It’s an employability issue, a longevity issue. It’s about the future of our country and our world. It’s hard to be in public service right now.

Public education is under attack. We want to make sure we are providing for the generations to come. Fight the good fight.

Pertinent Quotes

- “School system leaders are tasked with making prudent, rational decisions as we try to maintain a continuity of learning.”
- “As we get into racial equity conversations, we need to step up, particularly leaders of color.”
- “Let’s wake up with the resolve to get it done.”

- “Be specific and intentional on what we’re trying to accomplish and not sugarcoat it. Be relentless.”
- “I’m focusing on breathing. We need to realize how difficult breathing is for people of color. Their problem breathing is compounded by the disproportionate impact of COVID.”

Additional Questions/Commentary

- How can this crisis be used to direct more funding to tackling the student and community needs that have been laid bare?
- How are teachers addressing issues of equity in the classroom?
- How are educators reframing instruction to make sure the truth is told in history?
- How do you build trust with underserved communities to meet the needs of their students?
- Are there any safety concerns with what students can access when hotspots are dispensed or are there ways to ensure their safety?

Resources for Consideration

- Education Superhighway. (2020). *Digital Bridge K-12*. <https://www.educationsuperhighway.org>
- Portland Public Schools. *reimagined: Preparing our students to lead change and improve the world*. https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/219/PPS_Vision_Final.pdf
- Virginia Beach City Public Schools. *About Us: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*. https://www.vbschools.com/about_us/DEI



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