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 November 12 webinar was the third session of Discovery Education’s Equity Talks webinar series, Season 2. The panelists discussed their roles as leaders of color, particularly during times of crisis. They also talked about the strategies their districts were employing to combat not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but the serious economic and racial injustice concerns facing the nation. During this Equity Talk, panelists discussed the role of families, noting primarily that all families want only what is best for their children. Yet, many families living in under-resourced communities face challenges that other families may not. Another key theme of this discussion was how the COVID-19 pandemic changed each district's priorities and the impact that the shift has had on educators. The panelists discussed how professional development opportunities for educators in their districts have focused more on issues of antiracism and social justice, even when these discussions may make some educators uncomfortable.

Dr. Luvelle Brown, facilitator for this Equity Talk and superintendent of Ithaca Public Schools, began the discussion by posing the first question to the panelists: “What’s it like to be a superintendent at this time, in the midst of these multiple pandemics, especially a school leader of color?” One of the panelists described education as a “crucible,” and said, “If you are equity-minded in education, what’s happening...
under the heat is that we are seeing the cracks in the infrastructure of schooling opening and becoming more evident to the general population. We’ve always known there were inequities in opportunity and access, but they’ve been blown open.”

The panelists described how the pandemic brought to light the long history of certain schools and communities being under-resourced, which has led to many communities facing unprecedented challenges. For example, COVID-19 exacerbated the digital divide and forced communities to reckon with the lack of access to technology some families face. To answer Dr. Brown’s question of what it means to be a leader of color during this time, one described it as a “fine dance,” explaining that, as people of color, their leadership is always under public scrutiny while they partner with families, ensure staff well-being, and meet student needs. These leaders continue to leverage conversations around equity and anti-racism and partner with the community to find needed resources for families.

Another panelist agreed with the description of a “fine dance” and further explained the scrutiny that leaders of color often face:

“It puts us in a space where we have to be better every day. That gets exhausting, but it also puts us in a position where we can get excited about who we can become. As a superintendent of color, we’re in a situation where our culture has always been conditioned to believe that people of color are less capable of doing things, so naturally, people second guess every decision we put out there. We fight those things in a way that we can make sure we are making the right decisions and putting all this information and data behind it to support those decisions. We still continue to get second-guessed, but we know we are going to do what’s in the best interest of kids.”

This panelist also explained that uncovering these cracks in the education system stretches all staff, leaders, and educators alike. Some staff may not be comfortable with these types of conversations, but they need to be “comfortable being uncomfortable” if they are truly going to understand why these inequities exist and how to change them.

As a follow-up question, Dr. Brown asked the panelists to discuss policies and practices they are implementing in the name of equity, which may be receiving pushback from staff or from the community. One district remade the Student Code of Conduct into A Students’ Bill of Rights which emphasized student empowerment. Students contributed to the new Bill of Rights which named what they are entitled to do, what their responsibilities are, and what role they have in crafting the image of their school district. According to the panelist, staff needed to understand that their job is to create a space for children and youth because the space belongs to them, not the adults. It is the responsibility of the adults to design an education system that works well for students.

A district leader also shared how district staff have had authentic conversations where leadership discussed directly “these types of things that are oppressive for communities of color – things that we need to stop doing.” The panelist said that in the past, he would not have been so direct, and although there always will be staff who push back or are uncomfortable, the Board of Education has been supportive, and most staff are willing to work for change.

To promote this dialogue, this district provided a full-day symposium with national leaders, such as Dr. Clint Smith, to talk to staff about systemic racism and what equity should look like in schools. During the day, staff discussed why students of color are often underrepresented in gifted programs. They discussed the history of racism and laws that were passed deliberately to keep people from achieving or gaining access to opportunities. The district continued the conversations by inviting administrators to read Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America by Ibram X. Kendi. Cohorts of teachers will be encouraged to read it next, and then students will be asked to read it.
The district aims to have all the World History classes read the book this year. This leader emphasized that the goal of schools is ultimately to help students achieve academically, which is typically measured through test scores. However, if schools do not see the students for who they are and understand their experiences, the current trends will continue. The superintendent said, “Historically, in our district, we talk about test scores, raising test scores, and being better. Those things are important, but if you don’t change the conditions the kids walk into, test scores will never move. If I can give kids a place where they have a sense of belonging and connectedness, I’m going to be able to positively impact test scores.”

According to one panelist, staff members in her district went directly to the Office of Equity to request that leadership facilitate discussions about antiracism among district staff. Partnering with the local university, this district offered a one-credit four-week course to allow principals, teachers, central office personnel, and other staff members to have these discussions. The district is beginning to create antiracism policies and understands how COVID-19, racism, economic disparities, and mental health concerns are converging in their communities.

The panelists then talked about how the pandemic and concerns within education are affecting entire communities and the troubling, pervasive false narratives about these communities. A primary issue is that communities are not monolithic, although false narratives have been constructed about entire communities that would indicate otherwise. For example, when discussing how choice affects equity, a panelist said that there has been a perception in the community that Black and Brown parents did not want to send their children back to school because they do not care about education. However, when the district asked families what they wanted, approximately a quarter of the families from the Black and Brown communities said they wanted their children back in school, about half wanted the children to participate in school remotely for safety reasons, and the other quarter asked, “Are you able to keep them safe if we send them back?” The differences in the needs and concerns of the families within these communities illustrate that they were far from a monolith. Further, it was clear that families did not keep their children home because they did not care about education; rather, concerns about student health were foremost in their minds as they tried to make decisions that made the most sense for their family.

This panelist emphasized that equity also needs to be viewed through multiple lenses because communities are complex: “There is diversity in every community, and nobody has the right to claim that they speak for everybody.” The panelist continues to remind district staff of the changes that are coming in the future. She said, “There are families in every zip code who will be making choices after this crisis that, prior to this crisis, they may not have thought they could make. That’s one of the pieces for me on equity. Let’s get into real conversations and really hear what communities are saying to us.”

Dr. Jaime Aquino, senior vice president at Discovery Education, also added that he recently had overheard a conversation where an individual stated that the black and brown communities do not care about education, which is why they do not want to send their children into schools during the pandemic. This story line needs to be deleted from the narrative, Dr. Aquino said. He emphasized that the pandemic had hit the black and brown communities disproportionately harder than other communities. “If these families opted not to send their kid, it’s not that they don’t care about education,” he explained. “It was a matter of life and death, and they wanted to keep their kids at home to make sure they were safe. Because we have been disproportionately impacted by this pandemic and throughout our history as a country. We don’t get a break.”

Another panelist referred to this as an “adaptive challenge.” For this district, listening to students and families is critical to meeting their needs. As an example, the
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A panelist pointed to the fact that for some families, paying for Internet service became a necessity, on the same level as water and electricity, rather than a luxury. This panelist also acknowledged that the district started to view some students as “caretakers,” as well as students. In this community, older siblings often take care of the younger ones. They may be responsible for getting students up in the morning, feeding them meals, and even tutoring them. Understanding all the responsibilities of the students will help educators connect to them and provide them with the support they need.

Despite these issues, the panelists also reflected on some of the “silver linings” of these crises. One positive outcome is that families and non-classroom school personnel have been brought into the “core of teaching.” A panelist explained how bus monitors now supervise digital learning. Educators, according to this panelist, are doing things they were not trained to do, and they are doing these new tasks very well, even under pressure. Because of these changes and the “uncharted territory,” leaders must address questions of how education systems will continue to make the changes that this crisis brought to the surface. How will education systems continue to provide supports to educators who may find themselves in new positions and managing new priorities to ensure all students succeed?

Another positive outcome for the districts is the ability to partner more closely with other community organizations. A community schools approach is one way to coordinate and collaborate among all the partners. A panelist described how community schools can be influential during these times: “The crisis has pushed us in the city to look at the cross-division and cross-city collaborations in ways that are kind of reworking government – looking at how we need to organize the work differently and do it from the bottom up, as opposed to making students and families change for our bureaucratic gymnastics.” This district has been able to work with the Mayor’s Office of Family and Children to better align policy with the actual practice and experiences of families. Oftentimes, this goes beyond education to making sure other needs, such as adequate food, are being met.

A second panelist had a similar story and shared how the district partnered with the local municipality to share CARES Act funding. The district added a student wellness line to its help line to provide one-on-one technical assistance to families. When they realized they were receiving many requests for behavioral assistance, the district partnered with the municipality and merged their CARES Act funding in order to provide resources to families in need. As the panelist said, “Sometimes within crisis we find opportunity. This is an opportunity to rebuild things in such a way: a solid infrastructure for our children to be their best selves.”

An important topic of discussion was new approaches to professional development. A panelist explained how the health, economic, and social justice crises pushed the district to teach and talk about components of critical race theory for education. The district is encouraging staff members to dig deep into the data to explore the history and current status of these issues. As the panelist explained, “We talked a bit unofficially about what desegregation looks like. Having those conversations about what it really looks like and how it pertains to this current moment in time and really digging deep into the data have shown us what is being highlighted by this crisis. This is truly an opportunity to fix it.”

During the last few minutes of the webinar, Dr. Brown asked two “lightening round” questions. First, he asked, “How are you different today compared to March 2020? How are you different as a leader?” One panelist said the crisis had made him more courageous because it is important: “If I don’t take that responsibility now and carry it forward,” he said, “we’re going to lose yet another generation of Black and Brown kids, and I can’t allow that to happen.”

Another panelist spoke about how people need to make real changes and not just participate in what she called...
“What is education going to look like? … We have a great opportunity to reframe what this looks like and how are kids being served and to create systems that are genuinely being designed for everyone to be able to partake and be successful, and for people and things that stand in the way of that. It is on us to knock those barriers down and bring our staff and teams along with us.”

“performance equity.” Everyone is talking about equity now, but how does that become practice? Providing a concrete example, this leader spoke about how there is less differential in quality teaching between schools than within schools. Often, people have a mistaken perception that a school in a low-income neighborhood will have lower student achievement. The panelist explained that, regardless of whether the school is located in a low socioeconomic or high socioeconomic community, students who come from more vocal families are more likely to be placed with a high-quality teacher than students from families who are not as involved in the education experience. As the panelist said, the CEO’s child is not going to be placed in the classroom of a “half-baked teacher,” whereas the child whose mother is working two jobs and does not have time to become as involved in the education process may be placed in the classroom of a teacher who may not be as qualified. In this district, a strong fifth grade math teacher was asked to teach in seven or eight different classrooms across 20 schools so that all students would have the benefit of working and learning from this individual. Instead of simply discussing issues of equity and how to make changes, the district took action to ensure that every child had access to a teacher who had proven results.

Dr. Brown’s second question was, “What would you say to the folks listening to this webinar to inspire them to be different tomorrow and better for our kids?” A panelist spoke about knocking down barriers for students throughout the education system: “What is education going to look like? It has to look different. It has to look different for us. If we don’t do anything differently, shame on us. We have a great opportunity to reframe what this looks like and how are kids being served and to create systems that are genuinely being designed for everyone to be able to partake and be successful, and for people and things that stand in the way of that. It is on us to knock those barriers down and bring our staff and teams along with us.”

The session concluded with a panelist reminding the audience that this work is not impossible, and in fact, has been done before. As a student of history, the panelist encouraged the audience to read the history books and pointed out that the literacy rate for African Americans was higher during the Great Migration than it is now. Educators know how to do this work and have many success stories. It is time for the system to change to match this progress. The panelist said, “Excellence in education for Black and Brown children is not some unique unicorn we have to find. It has been done before. We have examples of it. We have communities that have successfully educated their children.” Later, the panelist added, “People have done this in the face of lynching, amidst mass deportations, etc. People have figured out how to educate their children. It is only the systems that have not figured out how to do it.”

Pertinent Quotes

• “Get comfortable being uncomfortable.”

• “Historically, in our district, we talk about test scores, raising test scores, and being better. Those things are important, but if you don’t change the conditions the kids walk into, test scores will never move. If I can give kids a place where they have a sense of belonging and connectedness, I’m going to be able to positively impact test scores.”

• “The crisis has pushed us in the city to look at the cross-division and cross-city collaborations in ways that are kind of reworking government—looking at how we need to organize the work differently and do it from the bottom up, as opposed to making students and families change for our bureaucratic gymnastics.”

• “Sometimes within crisis we find opportunity. This is an opportunity to rebuild things in such a way: a solid infrastructure for our children to be their best selves.”
• “We have a great opportunity to reframe what this looks like and how our kids are being served and to create systems that are genuinely being designed for everyone to be able to partake and be successful, and for people and things that stand in the way of that. It is on us to knock those barriers down and bring our staff and teams along with us.”

• “Excellence in education for Black and Brown children is not some unique unicorn we have to find. It has been done before.”

Additional Questions/Commentary

• We want our children back in schools only if they can be safe—physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally!

• Equity means embracing difference and nuance.

• As a principal, I can honestly say that our parents care. Many are fearful, however. They do want their children to be successful. I am blessed to have an amazing team that is not afraid to visit these houses and take food, supplies, materials, and Chromebooks to make sure that our students have what they need. Thanks to the partnerships provided by the district.

• Internet needs to become essential for families across our nation. The lack of internet creates an unnecessary divide. We have done great work to ensure connection for all families, but we need to make sure this sticks AFTER the pandemic.

• The fact that families have to choose between WiFi and food or rent is an injustice. We need to push our legislators to make broadband free and accessible for all communities.

• Families in all zip codes, Black and Brown families, will never experience school the same way again. Families who now see their children thriving will no longer tolerate what they did before.

• Student and community connectedness are critical. The “how” is key in engagement, trust, and reliability.

• Our students of color often receive substandard education as a result of poor quality teaching and inadequate resources and access.

• We treat excellence in education for Black and Brown students as a limited commodity. It’s a function of institutional racism for sure.

• What have been the best books and other resources (e.g., podcasts) for staff discussion groups about equity and race, particularly in white majority education settings where they serve mostly students of color?

» The current times have caused us to accelerate some of the curriculum work we began prior to the pandemic. Our B’More Me curriculum for grades 6-12 is designed to create space for young people, particularly people of color, to study our city and the often untold histories of Black and Brown people being prioritized.

» From the B’More Me curriculum, students are sponsoring their own forum and initiatives.

Resources for Consideration


• Watson, A. (Host). (2017, October). 10 things every white teacher should know when talking about race (Season 5, Episode 7) [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Cornerstone for Teachers*. https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race

Speakers from Professional Development Sessions

• Dr. Clint Smith (https://www.clintsmithiii.com/about)

• Dr. Eddie Moore (https://www.eddiemoorejr.com/about-dr-moore-1)

To learn more about *Equity Talks*, visit DiscoveryEducation.com/Equity-Talks or call us at 800.323.9084