



Dr. Christina
Kishimoto



Dr. Kent
Scribner

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SEASON 2 | WEBINAR 4: TRANSFORMATION: RECREATE, INNOVATE, ELEVATE

*Dr. Christina
Kishimoto, State
Superintendent,
Hawaii Department
of Education*

*Dr. Kent Scribner,
Superintendent, Fort
Worth Independent
School District, Texas*

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 December 3 webinar was the fourth session of Discovery Education's *Equity Talks* webinar series, Season 2. The panelists discussed their roles as leaders during the COVID-19 crisis and the impact the pandemic has had not only within their districts but within the broader community. Both superintendents discussed policies the districts have implemented to combat inequities among students and families served by their districts. The superintendents also emphasized that leaders need to focus on the priority of educating students and ensuring equitable access to education, although they may have many other demands.

Dr. Luvelle Brown, facilitator for this Equity Talk and superintendent of Ithaca Public Schools, began the discussion by asking the panelists to provide a brief description of their districts. Dr. Kishimoto explained the unique context in Hawaii – it is the only state that is both a state education agency and a local education agency, which means Dr. Kishimoto serves as both state and district superintendent. The school system is spread across seven islands, so Dr. Kishimoto has to fly when she visits different localities. The district serves approximately 180,000 students, and according to Dr. Kishimoto, half of these students live in poverty. Dr. Kishimoto added that Hawaii is the most diverse state in the nation, which is reflected in the

student population where 81 percent is non-white. Approximately a quarter of the student population is native Hawaiian, and Hawaii is a dual language state: English and Hawaiian.

During the pandemic, Hawaii schools have remained primarily virtual. They opened the first quarter to 10 percent of the student population and are now up to approximately 20 percent being taught in-person. They have prioritized students who are not doing well in virtual environments to return to schools first. Dr. Kishimoto commented that, although Hawaii is known for having the best network of schools in terms of connectivity in the United States, this is not true for students' homes, particularly in rural areas. To address this issue, the school buildings have been opened for students to use to access the Internet, while maintaining social distance requirements.

Dr. Scribner then described the Fort Worth Independent School District. He stated that it is at an "interesting inflection point" and undergoing a "tremendous transformation." Fort Worth is the twelfth largest city in the nation and a very diverse city. Approximately 89 percent of the students are students of color, including 63 percent Latinx and 23 percent African American. According to Dr. Scribner, 85 percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Approximately 4,000 of the students speak any one of 50 different world languages, and 39,000 live in homes where Spanish is the primary language. Dr. Scribner added that these students are at an advantage because Fortune 500 companies recruit employees who are "bilingual, bicultural, and resilient collaborators" and that he looks forward to "preparing these students for success beyond high school through college, career, and community leadership."

Currently, the Fort Worth Independent School District is teaching students both in-person and virtually. However, all teachers, even those teaching students remotely, are teaching from physical school campuses. Recently, the Texas

Urban Council of Superintendents presented a letter to the Governor of Texas asking that teachers be among the first to receive the vaccine when it is available. Dr. Scribner added that "one of the silver linings of this global pandemic is that education, in fact, is very important, if not the most important institution in our society. We cannot allow this global health crisis to become a generational educational crisis, and getting our schools back in a safe way is essential."

After describing the districts, Dr. Brown asked the superintendents, "What's keeping you up at night? What are you thinking about today? What are your pressure points right now?" He asked this question within the context of dealing with a global pandemic as well as the multiple social issues, including social justice, that have been brought to national attention over the past few months.

For the superintendents, however, it is a matter of acknowledging the vision: "All students have a right to quality education, and the public school system is that hope." However, they face many challenges, such as budget crises and racial inequities that the pandemic has brought to light, particularly the socio-economic inequities. Regarding budgets, most districts know they will need to make cuts in certain areas. A panelist feared that these cuts will "decimate the progress we've made around not only closing the achievement gap but having a different perspective around equity, access, and quality." The racial inequity crisis can be seen as a generational poverty issue, which has affected communities in both Hawaii and Texas. How do public school systems provide access to a quality education for all students? This is a challenge that districts continue to struggle to overcome.

To address this question, a superintendent explained how educators need to view students, especially students from urban communities and students of color:

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“Public education has to be a hub of innovation for the communities in order for us to truly prepare students to be the ones that are going to help with the economic development and economic recovery.”

assets to be invested in, and we need to change that perspective and the conversation around the deficit model. ‘How do we minimize their failure’ is something that we need to reject. I do not want to minimize student failure. I want to maximize their success. Young people grow up to be adults. So the question is what kind of city-- what kind of community-- do you want to live in throughout this decade, and the next one, and the one after that? The only way to have a prosperous community is to invest in our students, who are in our classrooms today.

This mindset affects not only educators but also community members, especially community leaders who may have influence in how the districts provide education. However, as Dr. Brown emphasized, inequities cannot be eradicated without changes in policy. Dr. Brown next asked the panelists to speak about some of the policy shifts they are in the midst of that would “eradicate inequities that have been plaguing their institutions and are oppressive.”

The superintendents addressed many issues surrounding policies. First, they said that some of the current policies – at the national and state level – can make change difficult. Policies can be too limited and confining and should be refocused on prioritizing students. Policies should focus on access to college and getting students into competitive workspaces, creating multi-lingual policies, and ensuring that all students have access to Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM), hands-on, and culturally-based learning opportunities.

Second, a panelist added that organizations are designed to get the outcomes that they are getting, and if outcomes are going to change, then the design of the organization needs to change. A panelist quoted a colleague: “Transformation is an inside job. It has to happen from the ground up. You can have a flowery equity policy, but the magic is in the implementation.” The responsibility for creating an equity policy lies with the

adults, not the students. For example, the leaders need to look at the data to see which students are enrolling in Advanced Placement and honors classes and which students have disciplinary issues. Human resources need to examine their recruitment and retention policies. Ultimately, the panelist said, “We need to listen to our students and the counternarrative that exists among them, and really get good at every level of teaching and learning and organizational culture. It is something that has to happen every day, and we have to be very firm and courageous, and never, never give up the unrelenting work that we have to do.”

A suggestion was made to address the policy issues through public and private boards at both for-profit and non-profit organizations. Oftentimes, board members are white males, an aspect of many school boards that does not reflect the demographics of communities. Board membership should diversify to include more women and people of color. Additionally, education leadership roles tend to be held by white males, although 70 to 80 percent of the teaching force is female. A superintendent stated that for the first time, more than half of the state superintendents are female, and district leadership should begin to reflect those numbers as well.

Because of the restrictiveness of the policies, a panelist also emphasized that “public education has to be a hub of innovation for the communities in order for us to truly prepare students to be the ones that are going to help with the economic development and economic recovery.” Policies need to allow for innovation to happen. One specific example of limiting policies is one that pertains to the structure of the school day: A panelist suggested that leaders think about time differently to ensure that the needs of all students and families are being met. The panelist explained what this means for education more broadly:

We’ve got to think about where and how kids are learning and engaging. We’ve got to have it connected to the world

School systems, according to the panelists, have a core mission to educate students. Yet, they often find themselves providing additional services to the point where teachers spend as much time providing social and support services as they do teaching.

around them, and to have them fully engaged in the kind of innovation work that business and industry is engaged in, to really bring meaning to learning. We have to spend much more time thinking about a policy structure that allows for that innovation. To me, that gets a lot closer for an opportunity for equity.

Many of the webinar participants had questions for the panelists. Dr. Brown synthesized a few of the questions and asked the panelists, "If you could put a new person or system or structure in place to help eradicate inequity without worrying about a budget, what would you institute that would help operationalize the work?" A panelist suggested following the money and allowing the philanthropic and business leaders to become true equity warriors in order to propel a shift in the system. The district has responsibilities too, a panelist said. Districts need to teach concepts related to critical race theory and differentiated approaches to both students and educators. The panelist stated that districts also needed to "be courageous and talk about anti-racist activities and anti-racist classrooms. Point out implicit bias, a microaggression of all of those things."

Another question raised by the participants is what strategies the panelists are implementing to find students who are disengaged or who are not logging in to participate in virtual learning. In Hawaii, Dr. Kishimoto said that the district has outfitted vans that are WIFI-enabled to travel to rural areas and reach students who may not be able to get to buildings that have connectivity. Beyond the technology, the vans also carry necessary items, such as toothpaste and toothbrushes. Sometimes, teachers will go to parks with devices for students so they can work socially distanced. Essentially, leadership has decided to send educators to students who are unable to participate in education remotely or have access to the school buildings that are open to provide connectivity.

In Fort Worth, attendance has tended to drop off in the early grades. In fact,

Dr. Scribner said that the high school attendance numbers are fairly stable or even increasing. Because pre-kindergarten and kindergarten are not required in Texas, they have found that the numbers of students enrolled in these grades have decreased. To address this issue, the district recruited their best principals to develop parent partnerships, which led to developing partnerships with the faith community, social service agencies, community groups, and private preschools to reach out to parents and create hubs within neighborhoods. Dr. Scribner credited neighborhood leaders with making a major difference in the short-term by forming connections with families and faith leaders.

This raised the question about the role and limits of local education systems. School systems, according to the panelists, have a core mission to educate students. Yet, they often find themselves providing additional services to the point where teachers spend as much time providing social and support services as they do teaching. Questions raised included: Do we expect too much from our public school system to solve societies' challenges and problems? How can partner agencies be set up in a purposeful way to take on these roles? During the pandemic, education systems have taken on responsibility for everything from food distribution to creating hotspots. Should schools be responsible for connectivity, or is that a state or federal issue? These are challenging questions that lend themselves to further discussion.

At the end of the session, Dr. Brown asked a lightning round of questions. First, he inquired: "How are you different as a leader today than you were in March?" A panelist explained that over the past few months, the district and its leaders have a better understanding of the nature of leadership in a large organization. The panelist said being a leader of a district involves both science and art. It is complicated, as well as complex. Educators can do 'complicated;' they know how to build a budget, but the complexity is in navigating

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the unknowable. District leaders and educators quickly had to learn how to balance virtual and in-person learning while supporting and protecting teachers. The superintendent said, “I would say it caused me to reflect on the role of us as organizational leaders, which is management and differentiating between those two things.” Learning from the past also is essential. After Hurricane Katrina hit, data show that it took four years for students to recover academically. “We need to do better than that,” the superintendent added. “We cannot have a multiple-year response to the academic regression that has taken place again, particularly for our young learners.”

The other panelist added that over the past few months, the work has humbled educators at every level; they all see how much more they need to know to do this work effectively. Because of the multiple priorities, district leaders have been forced to prioritize and to “step away from a lot of the malaise that really doesn’t matter,” a superintendent said. At the end of the day, a leader needs to be able to ensure that the work mattered and not wish that they had not spent so much time on a particular issue.

Dr. Brown asked the presenters what they would say to other educators to inspire them. One panelist had the following closing remarks:

Leadership is not a job. It’s not a position. It’s a relationship, and recognizing that if we do not radically change the systemically racist and inequitable system that we have, the disparities between students is going to continue to grow. The way we build relationships is through interpersonal connection. The shortest distance between two people is through a story. So, you have to build those kinds of relationships. When I tell you a story, I’m exposing my values to you and you say, “Oh, I relate that to value, and there’s a connection there, and organizations really move at the speed of trust.” We must trust that we’re all focused and heading in the same direction. We have

worthy motives. We’re confident in what we’re doing. We’re dependable and will show up tomorrow morning and keep on pushing.

A second panelist added:

I would say use your bully pulpit and boldly demand the kind of changes that are needed. If you’re not going to do it, who’s going to do it? We’re in positions of leadership. This is not the time to be shy about equity or about combatting racism or institutional challenges that keep some students down. You have every right to say no to the things that are wasting your time and wasting everyone else’s time, as well. You do not need to feel like you have to show up everywhere. Show up where it matters, and don’t worry about it. You’ve got to lead boldly in order to make the change happen, and we’re now in positions to do that. It’s go time.

The webinar closed with Dr. Jaime Aquino, senior vice president at Discovery Education, summarizing the discussion and feedback from the webinar participants. In summarizing the comments from the chat and the discussion, he emphasized that the 100-year-old factory model no longer works for education; public education should be the hub of innovation for high-quality education. He reminded the participants that the panelists said students are assets to invest in and support. He added, “When we say there is an achievement gap, we get those results because we’re denying opportunities and experiences for our students to be successful.” He closed the webinar with the following statement for all leaders, educators, and stakeholders in providing quality, equitable education for all students: “We have to come together as a nation to solve the challenges we are facing. This is so true as our kids and our nation cannot afford further delay. We cannot lose another generation.”

Pertinent Quotes

- “Urban students are not problems to be solved. Students of color are not problems to be solved. They are assets to be invested in, and we need to change that perspective and the conversation around the deficit model.”
- “Transformation is an inside job. It has to happen from the ground up. You can have a flowery equity policy, but the magic is in the implementation.”
- “We’ve got to think about where and how kids are learning and engaging. We’ve got to have it connected to the world around them, and to have them fully engaged in the kind of innovation work that business and industry is engaged in, to really bring meaning to learning. We have to spend much more time thinking about a policy structure that allows for that innovation. To me, that gets a lot closer for an opportunity for equity.”
- “Leadership is not a job. It’s not a position. It’s a relationship, and recognizing that if we do not radically change the systemically racist and inequitable system that we have, the disparities between students is going to continue to grow. The way we build relationships is through interpersonal connection. The shortest distance between two people is through a story.”
- “I would say use your bully pulpit and boldly demand the kind of changes that are needed. If you’re not going to do it, who’s going to do it? We’re in positions of leadership. This is not the time to be shy about equity or about combatting racism or institutional challenges that keep some students down. You have every right to say no to the things that are wasting your time and wasting everyone’s time, as well. You do not need to feel like you have to show up everywhere. Show up where it matters, and don’t worry about it. You’ve got to lead boldly in order to make the change happen, and we’re now in positions to that.”

Additional Questions from Chat

- Can you elaborate on how in your systems, the equity work and visions are getting operationalized in the school and classrooms?
- Do any of your districts do a form of community schools?
- Distance/remote learning has made the disparity of student support at home even more obvious. What are some strategies that have been used to encourage parent support, communication, involvement and engagement in school decision-making and student success?
- Across the country, districts are “missing students.” Unfortunately, the missing students are primarily our students of color. What steps are you taking to locate and support missing students?
- How are you engaging the voices of your students with the work taking place in your districts?
- How are you changing the mindsets of teachers and other staff regarding, perhaps, their long-held beliefs that they are indeed providing equity, when, in fact, it has been seriously lacking?
- As leaders who have a national voice, how have you used your voice to influence policy at the federal and state level to change policies that disadvantage students?
- What are the opportunities for new roles in the school ecosystem that have been revealed by COVID-19? If you could add a role that would allow you to maximize this opportunity right now, what would that person be doing (e.g., community partnership manager, marketing manager, public partnership specialist)? Are you seeing the need for backgrounds beyond education to become contributors to increasing education’s role in securing a solid footing for the future of the country?

Additional Commentary from Chat

- “Teachers ARE essential workers!”
- “Fabulous that women are moving up in the leadership ranks!”
- “Teaching people how to be courageous and confident to speak up without fear of being alienated by the status quo.”
- “The 100-year-old model of factory education has to be broken.”
- “School is bigger than academics. Kids can’t learn when so much of what we know we need for success is missing.”
- “Leadership is relational.”
- “Being mindful of how many teachers are overwhelmed and our current teacher shortage. We must concentrate on what matters (not everything).”
- “We are seeing the decrease in early grades. We are using a Google Doc to track absences and then calling, texting, contacting family members, and doing everything we can to see if we can serve the families if they are in need. My district is hybrid. Keeping in mind that EVERY CHILD deserves a FREE and FABULOUS education, it is hard when a child is not being brought to school. That student has a basic human right that is not being met.”

Resources for Consideration

Articles about equity, shared by Dr. Christina Kishimoto:

- Essoyan, S. (2020, August 11). Ohana Help Desk gives tech support to Hawai'i public school students, families. *Star Advertiser*. <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/08/11/hawaii-news/ohana-help-desk-gives-tech-support-to-hawaii-public-school-students-families>
- Essoyan, S. (2020, April 3). Hawai'i public schools try to bridge digital divide by sharing laptops. *Star Advertiser*. <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/04/03/hawaii-news/hawaii-public-schools-try-to-bridge-digital-divide-by-sharing-laptops>
- Fujii-Oride, N. (2020, April 1). Preparing teens for tomorrow. *Hawaii Business Magazine*. <https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/preparing-teens-for-tomorrow/>
- Petranik, S. (2020, October 6). 8 essential leadership skills for today's world. *Hawaii Business Magazine*. <https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/8-essential-leadership-skills-for-todays-world/>
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- Petranik, S. (2020, June 7). Teaching in a new world: Hawai'i State Department of Education. *Hawaii Business Magazine*. <https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/restarting-hi-hidoe>

Professional Development Referenced

- Courageous Conversations. <https://courageousconversation.com/about/>

