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# **DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION:**

A BLUEPRINT FOR ALL SCHOOL  
DISTRICT LEADERS

**IN COLLABORATION WITH:**

THE RTM K-12 NATIONAL  
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We look forward to hearing from you!



# **DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION:**

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# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION:

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## INTRODUCTION



There is no doubt that the development of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) begins in the classroom. Key to this development are the strategies and resources teachers use in the classroom that determines if students believe they are seen, heard, and included so that they are able to thrive. Therefore, it is imperative that school districts work diligently to provide each teacher and leader with the skills and understandings needed to properly support and prepare students for their future.

One does not have to search far to find district mission, vision, and belief statements that include “all students.” Philosophically, educators are taught from their first education class that “all” students can learn and we have to represent “all” students. However, in examples across the country, including those with “all students” in their mission, vision, and belief statements, it is difficult to find evidence that all means all based on gaps in student achievement as well as policies and procedures that are not equitable in practice. While this is not always intentional, there are groups of students in our schools and districts who are not provided equitable access to learning and resources and do not feel a sense of inclusion due to a lack of representation in the curriculum, implicit bias of school staff, microaggressions from other students and staff, and more. Some inequity may be due to a lack of awareness that causes unintentional exclusion.

While many in the community and even staff or board at the district may believe that DEI work is not necessary because the district is not aware of systemic issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is important not to look from just a 10,000 foot view. To use an analogy, think of a rainforest. From the air, it looks lush and green and healthy. However, if one were to walk through it on the ground, there are issues and challenges present. This is much like a district. From the whole, it looks good, but once you start looking closer, there are areas that need improvement and students whose needs are not being met.



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The purpose of this blueprint is to create greater understanding of ways in which administrators, principals and teachers can make students feel represented, which can create a sense of inclusiveness, increase engagement, align to current district-wide equity initiatives, and create the right environment for academic success. Building empathy around some of the key issues that will be discussed here can help district administrators and staff garner the support they need from their community and state boards of education to demystify and depoliticize the DEI work. Any district, or board, undertaking this work should understand that the work is hard, might be uncomfortable at times, and can cause conflict and disruption. Being uncomfortable is part of growing in understanding and it is a natural part of the DEI work. In order for these uncomfortable conversations to be productive, it is crucial that norms be established.

As mentioned above, awareness is key. In light of recent social unrest and cultural developments, the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, exacerbated by pandemic-related trauma, teachers and staff need to be equipped with the right language, resources, and tools to turn DEI frameworks and goals into practice. Students and families have become more engaged and amplifying their voices gives them ownership of the learning process.

When students feel included and heard, see themselves represented in the curriculum, and are respected for who they are, positive outcomes are more likely to occur.

### **WHAT IS DEI?**

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DEI has become a buzzword in the last several years. Definitions of each of these terms vary from district to district and it is important for districts to define diversity, equity, and inclusion and what it means to them and their community. Most definitions are similar when compared across districts, but it is important that stakeholders (including students and parents) have a say in defining what those terms mean when being used properly.

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For the purpose of this blueprint, we will use the definitions set by Harvard University Human Resources in their [Glossary of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging](#).

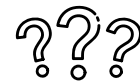
- **Diversity:** The condition of being different or having differences. Differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, health, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, religion, physical size, education level, job and function, personality traits, and other human differences.
- **Equity:** Fair treatment for all while striving to identify and eliminate inequities and barriers.
- **Inclusion:** Everyone is included, visible, heard and considered.

To further explore definitions related to DEI in education, you may want to review these district glossaries:

- [Evanston Skokie District 65 \(IL\) Equity Glossary](#)
- [Alexandria City Public Schools \(VA\) Educational Equity Glossary](#)
- [Winchester Public Schools \(VA\) Glossary of Terms](#)
- [Jefferson County Public Schools \(KY\) Diversity/Equity Definitions](#)
- [Highline Public Schools \(WA\) Equity Policy Terms & Phrases Defined](#)

## CREATING A DEI FRAMEWORK

### *Start with the Why*



Most districts' mission and vision statements have the same underlying belief that the job of K-12 education is to prepare ALL students for college and/or careers. Strategic plans around the country have goals and indicators to address how they will ensure students have the tools and skills necessary to be successful for the future. One of the fundamental areas often overlooked is the equity issue to ensure all students have access to the same tools and systems to be successful. As part of the DEI work, districts must hone in on inequities in order to remove the barriers for all students to be successful. This will oftentimes require a hard look at board policies, district policies, and school policies. What policies or traditions may be holding students back from achieving their full potential?



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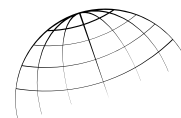
Few districts that have embarked on the DEI work have done so without criticism. That criticism has been more frequent and pronounced the last few years as these conversations have become politically charged. Having a strong, well-communicated “why” will help all members involved (board, district leadership, district staff, school staff, etc.) communicate effectively to members of the community. While everyone may still not agree with the work that is being done, the message will be communicated consistently across the community. All this is critical to consider carefully ahead of time in order for DEI implementations to be successful.

Changes to federal, state, and local legislation may be a catalyst for creating divisiveness around DEI work. While legislation may be positive, these topics can shift in purpose from student-centered to political. While this should not be a deterrent from doing the work, district leaders must recognize that certain topics are politically charged. Again, having a strong “why” that is focused on students (and staff) is critical.

As an example, bills passed in California and Illinois allow for the overhaul of social learning standards and more inclusive historical narratives to highlight the contributions of underrepresented groups in American culture. Promoting respect and understanding among all races uplifts all students, not just learners from marginalized groups. It is important to recognize and understand student beliefs when they say that they don’t feel seen or heard.

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### ***Creating the Vision and Support for DEI Work***

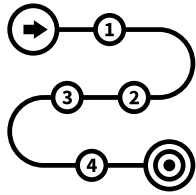


As more districts around the country begin embarking on DEI work, it is critical that the work be embedded into the district’s strategic plan to ensure that proper focus and emphasis is in place. Additionally, DEI planning must ensure the appropriate funding is allotted. To do this, district boards, leadership, and labor management (if applicable) must have ownership and alignment around this important work. Making them key stakeholders might be difficult, but it is critical to moving forward.

Some work must be done with the board and leadership to ensure they understand the why. Any work a district does will be in vain if not supported by the group of people who create the policies to ensure the DEI work can happen. Districts have plenty of data to show where inequities occur. This is a good place to start with the board to help explain the “why” and the critical nature of the work the district will undertake.

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Districts can create a framework to help facilitate the DEI work in their district. While key equity and diversity strategies are necessary, there must be a vision to guide the work and more importantly, there must be a roadmap for how a district will accomplish the work. Without a clear roadmap, true change can be hampered due to leadership changes.

Once a framework has been implemented, you should be able to see the framework in practice as evidenced by changing behaviors among teachers, staff, students, and the community. A DEI plan is only as good as the ability to successfully carry it out. Therefore, having a good road map and a willingness to have honest conversations can ensure progress. It is critical that once we identify a DEI issue, we do our best to solve the problem and not return to the normal state that initially created complacency.

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## ***Assembling a DEI Committee***



Perhaps one of the most important decisions when districts are about to undertake this work is determining what stakeholders to include and the organization of the committee. Each district must determine who should be included. It is important to have a diverse group of stakeholders. DEI is a whole community effort, not just a school district effort. Community support and help are critical for success. It is critical that all perspectives are represented if the work is going to be valued and supported. Some districts have strategically asked a community member or members to lead the group. This can build trust as well as ownership and alignment in the plan.

Students should have a voice in policies and procedures created that govern them. Each district must determine what this looks like given the context of the district. Some districts support schools creating student equity teams to allow students to explore, learn, teach, and advocate for equity issues that are important to them. There is no perfect approach, but student voice is critical since policies and procedures may be established based on the committee's findings.

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Creating an inclusive vision for the committee is critical. Some districts have chosen to solely focus on race and ethnicity. This is a very narrow definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion. There needs to be a collective understanding that diversity, equity, and inclusion includes other definitions such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, language, etc. If the DEI committee establishes the definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a first task, the scope will define itself as it will become about those definitions and not just racial equity. If the goal is to ensure ALL students feel included, it is critical to ensure ALL students are represented in the DEI work.

The leader, or facilitator, of the DEI committee is critical to the success and outcomes of the group. Providing a strong facilitator can navigate disagreements and sensitive topics in a productive, unbiased way. Many districts have paid or chosen a member of the community to facilitate the group. Many of the community members of the DEI committee may not know much about the district. The district's key role is to educate the committee about the district, the initiatives currently going on, and most importantly, the challenges they have around equity, diversity, and inclusion they want the committee's help in solving.

Regardless of the size, strong protocols can help make sure everyone has a voice. While there is no "one size fits all" model for establishing the DEI committee, size is one thing to take into consideration so the work can be most productive. This will vary by district. It is important to keep the committee to a manageable size so that meaningful work can happen while also ensuring that all diversity is represented.

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### ***Creating a Safe Environment for Differing Opinions***



When having sensitive discussions, a committee should have group norms. A good facilitator can create strong norms with the group to help guide those critical conversations. Some examples of norms for controversial discussions may include: Listen to understand, not to respond; consider other people's opinions and perspectives; listen respectfully without interrupting; ask questions to learn, not to debate; share the air, etc. Norms should be reviewed at each meeting in order to reinforce expectations and remain productive. If every member of the committee does not feel safe to voice their opinion, the work of the committee will not be as genuine or representative of all. While disagreement and difficult discussion is uncomfortable, it can be healthy to the process.



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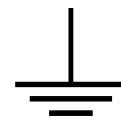
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Protocols also help create a safe space for discussion and are critical for this work to be most productive and to ensure all voices are heard. Sometimes general discussion does not always result in all voices being heard. Rather, establish some protocols that allow small groups to discuss and report out, mix up groups regularly so there are different perspectives, etc. There can be a listening and thinking protocol to encourage DEI committee members to come back to the table with an open mind after considering and re-evaluating, during tough conversations, “why was I uncomfortable about that?” People need to be willing to put in the authentic work to have conversations outside of their comfort zone and they also need time to reflect on those conversations. It is important not to rush this work or the discourse if the goal is long-lasting and true change. These committee conversations can help set the stage for public conversations that will occur when implementation of the DEI plan begins. The [Racial Equity Analysis Protocol](#) by Jefferson County Public Schools is a good example of a public courageous conversation about identity and representation and of taking a risk that paid off.

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## ***Grounding the Work***



Throughout the DEI work, it is critical that data be presented in a thoughtful way in order to strengthen understanding of the current state of the district and determine a desired state moving forward. The DEI committee should determine what data they want to see in order to identify problems and develop solutions. In order for the DEI work to be most meaningful and impactful, data must be presented honestly and in a way that the committee will understand it so that meaningful conversations can occur.

The district plays a key role in providing the data necessary for the committee to analyze, draw conclusions, ask questions, and ultimately come up with strategies with district administrators in order to provide solutions.

Some of the most critical conversations the DEI committee will engage in is finding the root causes to problems and not simply treating the symptoms. True DEI work is most effective when root causes can be identified and effort is put towards solving those root causes. Treating symptoms will provide a quick fix that appears to solve the problem, but those symptoms will soon return because the root cause was not treated.



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There should be a continuous cycle of improvement in place to be sure that strategies can be evaluated for success. In many cases, it may take multiple years to see evidence that a strategy is working. It is critical the committee establish a process to continuously monitor those strategies for success and strategically abandon or alter those that are not yielding results.



### ***Implementing the Plan***

One of the challenging aspects of the DEI work is the implementation of the final plan or framework. Some districts will choose to embed the DEI strategies and goals in their strategic plan so as not to create a separate plan that has to be monitored. Others will want a separate plan to guide the work. Regardless of the approach, establishing measurable goals and timelines is critical to make sure the DEI work continues to move forward.

Oversight and implementation of the plan can be more complicated by the size of the district, geography, and other changing variables. It is critical that a plan be put in place and approved or endorsed by the board and district leadership in order to monitor the strategies that are being implemented as part of the committee's work. Even though committees may not meet as frequently, the DEI committee should not be a one and done, but rather serve as an accountability group to help keep the district on track, continue to brainstorm strategies to solve problems, and progress monitor strategies already put in place to ensure success. The committee can also review progress towards strategies to ensure the root cause is being treated and not the symptoms. Once the initial work is done and a plan put in place, the committee should discuss the operational aspects of the committee and such items as how long members should serve on the committee, how often they should meet to review data, measure progress, and evaluate milestones.

To oversee the implementation of the committee developed strategies, many districts choose to establish a team to oversee the framework progress. Since all departments should be engaged in this process, it is logical that the superintendent and district's leadership team lead these efforts. Buy-in is critical and most of the work led at that top level creates a cascading sense of urgency and impact. It must be prioritized from the top down in order to become institutionalized in the district.



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The DEI committee and district must also recognize that the plan may need to change based on circumstances and current events that arise in the community. A change in focus may sometimes be necessary when certain issues in the community occur. It's important to respond while continuing to drive the direction and priority of the work. Controversy in the community impacts the schools, so it is important to address those issues that will certainly impact students.

To further explore district DEI frameworks, you may want to learn more about these:

- [Boston Public Schools \(MA\) Essentials for Equity](#)
- [New York State Education Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework](#)
- [Loudoun County Public Schools \(VA\) Culturally Responsive Framework](#)

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## ***Key DEI Considerations***



There are topics and strategies that regularly occur in districts that have embarked on the DEI journey, regardless of size, geographic location, or focus. The topics and strategies discussed here are not exhaustive but are reflective of what is occurring around the country.

### ***- Risk Assessment***

This work can leave a district vulnerable to various risks. Those risks and threats range from political risks/threats to disrupting a comfortable established status quo that does not meet the needs of all students. It is critical to identify the areas of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT Analysis) so leadership can better be prepared to tackle those issues ahead of time to ensure the work is productive.

Part of the DEI work is to learn and challenge misconceptions, which by nature is risky with a large, diverse group of people. People may become defensive when their perspectives are challenged. As mentioned before, having strong protocols to help people reflect on the work or positions that make them uncomfortable will help them grow to a better understanding of the DEI work. Ongoing conversations about race, language, sexual orientation, culture, disabilities, economics and social constructs, social justice, and teaching tolerance, need to be established and created as a practice. A key component to undertaking the DEI work is putting in the time and research into listening to understand and researching different perspectives.

### – *Creating a Welcoming and Affirming Environment*

Many teachers do a great job at creating a welcoming environment, however creating an affirming environment is something different. It is critical for teachers to understand and conceptualize what an affirming environment looks like in practice. Defining what a welcoming and affirming environment looks like, sounds like and feels like in that district is a necessary component of an effective DEI Framework.

Educators need to be aware of their implicit biases and how microaggressions impact students. In most cases, staff do not set out to be biased or make students feel bad. Microaggressions, in particular, are mostly done out of ignorance, not with malicious intent. Below are some common examples of microaggressions that are often heard:

- Telling a non-native speaker they “speak good English”
- Telling a person of color “you are so articulate”
- Asking an LGBT staff member “Who is the man (or woman) is in the relationship”
- Asking a female “why aren’t you staying home with your kids”

Professional learning is the best way to combat microaggressions and implicit bias.



District and school leaders can create a sense of belonging and inclusiveness for all families. Policies and communications should be examined to ensure all families are represented. For example, using languages like “parent” versus father and mother can prevent isolating single-parent families and LGBTQ parents. As the DEI committee meets and examines policies and practices, it is critical all aspects of DEI are examined to ensure that schools are not inadvertently isolating families.

### – *Rigor and High Academic Expectations*

Academic conversations may tend to be the focus of the DEI committee. After all, the ultimate goal is to create an environment for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc., to be successful and achieve their goals and be fully prepared for their future.

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<sup>1</sup> A statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group (Oxford)

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It is critical that rigor and high academic expectations remain a topic of the DEI committee. Having strong non-negotiables and written high expectations can help establish a baseline. The DEI group may need to examine the current district academic protocols and expectations when it comes to how rigor and high expectations are monitored day to day.

It is also essential that school staff understand what high expectations look like. A strong principal can help establish those high expectations and district staff can help support the principal through instructional rounds and learning walks. These help school teams identify problems of practice and move student achievement. Learning walks and instructional rounds may help school administrators see what quality instruction looks like and can provide a benchmark for them to achieve, particularly if they are in a turnaround, or underachieving school. Understanding students of poverty is critical regardless of race, gender, sexual identity, etc., in order to best help them achieve. Students of poverty are no less intelligent than students of means, however, understanding that students of poverty have gaps in knowledge because they did not have access to the same experiences as other students will help schools and teachers identify and narrow those gaps so they can achieve.

An essential component of establishing rigor and high expectations in the classroom is having an equity-focused curriculum. This can take years of refining, implementing, monitoring and re-adjusting to ensure that the curriculum is accomplishing the goals it was sent out to meet.

One of the first places districts can start on building an equity-focused curriculum is by looking at the available data to see where gaps and disparities exist. A majority sub group in the data may paint an inaccurate picture of students' performance. For example, high-performing schools are often not given much analysis because they are high achieving. However, by taking a closer look, districts may find that there is an underperforming sub group. Once a thorough data analysis is done, steps then can be taken to find solutions to why there is underperformance among a certain sub group.

Using varied assessment practices along with believing in students' ability to be successful, encouraging them to learn, empowering them to think for themselves and to be changemakers can be an effective DEI strategy. Students should feel psychologically safe to take risks and learn outside of their current schema. All of these support mechanisms are essential

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conditions in providing a culturally diverse and inclusive framework. Jefferson County Public Schools (KY) has the student [Backpack of Success Skills](#), a digital portfolio system that allows students to showcase their learning in five key areas – emerging innovator, productive collaborator, effective communicator, globally and culturally competent citizen, and prepared and resilient learner. This allows students to be their authentic selves and share their learning through the context of who they are.

Fostering a belief system where the students genuinely feel that what makes them who they are (their sense of identity) is being celebrated, and offering the teachers as much support as possible in doing this work lays the foundation for open and constructive conversations. Culture, race, poverty, language, and policymaking are all inextricably connected factors that influence equitable opportunities to learn.

### - *Equity Focused Leadership*

One of the most important aspects of furthering DEI in a district is strong leadership. Without this, an understanding of what equity is and what it looks like in the classroom will quickly fail and lose impact. Boston Public Schools is a great example of equity-focused leadership. In an effort to build emotional capacity for teachers and faculty to practice equity-oriented leadership at the Boston Public Schools, all members of the community are strengthened by a year-long professional development and book study on equity and underserved youth. Regular opportunities to hear from experts, authors, and advocates allow for teachers and leaders to be inspired and motivated to do this work. Finally, connecting best practices in the literature of respected authors helps create greater relevance for many adults, as well as a shared understanding.

Involving the community in these discussions, whether part of the DEI committee or some other committee is key. Professional development is often looked at as something for educators, but in fact, the DEI committee and other community members can benefit from professional development around equity practices to ensure the conversations are productive.

Strong academic leadership is also key in order to see the DEI committee's equity work translate to classroom practices. Each district provides varying levels of support around curriculum and resources. In some districts, this may be more scripted than others and in some districts, teachers have full autonomy on what to use. Regardless of the model, it is important

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that expectations be established and teachers feel empowered to use the appropriate resources aligned with the district's vision for diversity, equity and inclusion with students to ensure all students are represented in the curriculum and resources used in the classroom.

As administrators and district leaders develop tools for classroom observations, equity should be included. An observation tool that looks through the eyes of students will be most impactful when it comes to seeing how students view instruction. Traditional classroom observations focus solely on what the teacher is doing within a lesson. Instead, a strong, student-focused observational tool can go a long way to ensuring the equity and diversity practices are translating into the classroom because administrators are looking at instruction through the eyes of the students.

## *- Hiring Staff Who Are Representative of the Student Population*

In order to feel like they belong, student diversity should be reflected and represented in school staffing. Even in schools where there is little student diversity, it is important for staffing to represent the community as a whole. Hiring diverse candidates increases the representation of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas. District and school leadership must have awareness of what diversity is represented in their school(s) and district to be proactive in seeking candidates to increase representation. Even when trying to hire diverse candidates in education, districts may struggle to find a pool of candidates, much less a diverse pool. This requires school districts to be intentional in recruitment and in their partnerships with local institutions of higher education. Below are a few examples of innovative partnerships that seek to increase the pool of diverse candidates.



In partnership with Northwestern University and National Louis University, Evanston Skokie District 65 (IL) launched the CREATE Teacher Residency program. CREATE is a sustainable residency that prepares highly effective, diverse, and long-term teachers to serve D65 students. The program includes an intensive, one-year teacher preparation program that puts resident teachers in classrooms with students for four-days a week to learn the craft of instruction under the guidance of an experienced educator. Simultaneously, residents were able to complete their Master's level coursework at a partnering university. Students receive intense support in the classroom for a full year with talented teachers. After completing the residency, they are ready to teach immediately once they graduate and become educators.



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Hillsborough County Public Schools (FL) has partnered with Florida A&M University<sup>1</sup> to create a teacher academy that focuses on building the next generation of educators. This program begins in the 9th and 10th grade, and offers a dual enrollment opportunity for students in career & technical classes. When students graduate and exit the program, they will have completed nearly three years of their bachelor's degree.

Clemson University has the Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) initiative that works to increase the pool of African American male candidates for teaching positions in local school districts. Candidates are largely selected from among underserved, socio-economically disadvantaged and educationally at-risk communities.

Wake County Public School System (NC) has a recruitment initiative called Future Teachers that identifies a diverse pool of high school students who intend to pursue a career in education. Once a student becomes a Future Teacher, they attend annual summer professional development (with stipends), have the opportunity to develop relationships and network with Wake County Public School System staff, and receive a job offer once they are licensed.

## CONCLUSION



While the DEI work is some of the most difficult work districts will engage in, it is also some of the most rewarding work. If “all means all”, then all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion have to be examined for all students. It is easy to hide behind high test scores when a school or district is high performing. However, taking a hard look at the students who are not performing and why they are not performing is the true mission of the equity work. All students must feel valued and included.

We must first build relationships with students so they know they are valued, heard and supported before they can learn at their fullest potential. Teaching our students to respect others, value diversity, and have the ability to appreciate other people's perspectives is a critical life skill.