

Now More than Ever, Schools Need to Keep Race and Equity at the Center

© Mary Antón and Lee Teitel May 2020

In March, we were told that Covid 19 was an [“equal opportunity virus”](#) or [“a great equalizer.”](#) We now know that, like so many things in our country, disease and death fall disproportionately on the poor, people of color. The news is devastating, with death rates for Blacks two and three times their percentage of the population in cities like Milwaukee and Chicago; and Latinos in California account for 59% of the deaths in the 18-64 range. As more comes out, we know it will just be getting worse.

In the midst of the disruption caused by the pandemic, it has been hard to keep a focus on race and equity in schools. And yet in this time of destruction of our very notion of what it means to be a teacher, of how we do school, **we face a great opportunity**. Schools historically have been places designed to indoctrinate immigrants, the poor, black and brown into becoming good “citizens” (e.g. quiet, workers who stay in their place) and follow white norms. As we **rethink** what the systems of education can be, as we question our assumptions about how school is done, how lessons are provided, how we interact with families and how we meet student needs, we have the opportunity to restructure our systems in ways that are powerful.

The two of us have been working for years trying to make these long term shifts around race and equity, through an equity project at Harvard and as independent consultants working with networks of schools and districts. We are energized by this work and humbled by how much we are learning from our educator partners. Last month, these efforts ground to a halt. Monthly support meetings and equity trainings were postponed or cancelled, as schools scrambled to shift to distance learning and support students. We had to pivot and reconceptualize our relationship with schools and leaders, to follow their lead on when and how to focus on equity work. We shifted from structured programs and formal consulting arrangements to more fluid virtual conversations that bring together teachers and leaders, often from across the country, to wrestle with issues together.

From these virtual conversations, we have learned five important ways that educators are using the opportunities in the midst of the devastation to keep race and equity on the table.

1. Continue **equity improvement efforts that have already begun.**

Samuel Etienne, an elementary principal in Elizabeth, NJ, builds on an equity improvement cycle he learned with us at Harvard last November to focus on belongingness. People need certainty in times of crisis to feel safe, to do their best work, so belongingness is supported in the intentional structures he creates virtually, like a daily “coffee break” time where everyone is invited to join, connect, ask questions. “Times of disruption are also times of incredible opportunity,” Etienne says. “These meetings are more than informal get togethers, information sessions - they set the stage and sow the seeds for how we do business together differently now.”

2. Use **equity lenses to creatively examine Covid-related choices**

At the start of closings, many systems decided against virtual learning, using inequities in technology as the reason, essentially saying ‘if we can’t provide it for all, to be equitable, we should provide it for none.’ Principal Eliza Loyola, describes how Austin ISD is creatively challenging this assumption: “We are putting wifi hubs on our busses and driving them to the areas, the apartment complexes, the places students will most likely need access”. Headed out each morning, busses do double duty - providing access where most needed, and bringing free meals to families.

3. **Go beyond deficit thinking.**

In times of disruption, attention often goes to who is struggling. Moving toward asset-based thinking, equity-focused leaders discuss “Where are we seeing the unexpected? Who is benefiting during this time?” Across the country, leaders are seeing unexpected silver linings. In NJ, students who never turned in assignments are now using on-line platforms and getting work done. A special educator from the Midwest describes how a student who is usually so unfocused, is now so connected - “he’s showing me his room, he’s asking about my pets. We see each other in different ways now.” Urban students in the Northeast who normally take long bus rides to “better schools” in the suburbs are thriving academically working from home. Principal Etienne capitalizes on this, explicitly asking his teachers, “Who is thriving right now?”

4. **Investigate and act on teachable moments:**

Crises often lead to difficult conversations and teachable moments. An Asian American teacher in California wonders how to help her mostly Asian students deal with the rise of anti-Asian racism. In New England, a teacher reports an elementary child’s comment at morning meeting to a school leader - together they plan to address the anti-Asian bias the next day. High schoolers use senior projects to survey peers on their experiences or use data about racially disproportionate Covid impacts in social studies classes.

5. **Build connections across schools, districts and states.**

Virtual spaces allow for dialogue that intentionally cross school, district, and state lines. They provide connection and moral support for leaders and teachers focusing on race and equity. They also expand the pool of colleagues by providing access to ideas, resources, and equity commitments that may not be shared or available in local schools or districts.

The lessons we are learning from these educators give us hope. Decisions about the everyday aspects of running school **can and are** intertwined and threaded through with the recognition that **race matters**, that **inequities exist**. If we continue to hold these up for inspection, we can **challenge** both individual teacher assumptions and **invisible institutional white norms** that lift up some and oppress others. We know these are not the only examples and look forward to hearing from others doing this work. In the disruption of schools as we know them, we have an opportunity to dismantle racism as has never been presented before.

Bios:

Dr. Lee Teitel is the Founding Director and (currently) Senior Consultant of the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools ([RIDES](#)) Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After 20 years on the Harvard faculty, Lee is now working as an independent consultant, supporting Equity Improvement Networks in 40 schools and districts across the country. He can be reached at Lee_Teitel@Harvard.edu.

Dr. Mary Antón is a retired public school principal and Equity Leadership coach working with school leaders, schools and districts through RIDES and her own company to dismantle racism in educational systems and to support aspiring and current leaders of color across the country. She is a member of the board of directors at POCIS Northern California (People of color in Independent Schools). Mary can be reached at mary@learningleadingbecoming.org.