What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

"The Purposeful Principal *is an essential resource for prospective and current school leaders. It provides a well-articulated collection of competencies, resources, and activities that together offer a comprehensive and practical leadership development program specifically designed to help principals become effective school leaders. The book guides school leaders through real-world situations and everyday practice to help them pursue student-centered and success-driven approaches. Inspirational and practical at the same time, it provides school leaders with the vision, courage, knowledge, and skills to challenge inequity, build new systems, and promote equity and humanity in our schools. It can help every school leader create schools that are places where all students experience their full human potential.*"

Sheldon Berman, Board Chair, AASA
Lead Superintendent for Social-Emotional Learning

"The Purposeful Principal *is a comprehensive compilation of information, principles, & practices that prompts the principal practitioner to intentionally & intelligently self-reflect. For the principal, as a critical thinker, decision-maker, problem solver, & visionary, this manual is meaningful, mission-minded, and designed for professional maturation and immediate application, while rooted in the context of equity, diversity, & inclusion. Kudos to the authors.*"

Nelson A. Henry, Chief Innovation Officer, Center for
Strategic Leadership and Organizational Coherence, MI

"The Purposeful Principal *delivers a powerful, job-embedded framework that transcends mere theory to offer concrete, actionable guidance for cultivating an "Every Student Succeeds Mindset." It masterfully blends adaptive leadership and deep self-reflection, directly challenging leaders to confront systemic biases and courageously dismantle inequitable practices through "audacious actions." This essential guide cultivates the relational trust vital for fostering truly joyful, inclusive learning environments, ensuring every student's identity is profoundly affirmed and valued. For leaders prepared to courageously navigate education's complex, ever-changing landscape,* The Purposeful Principal *is an indispensable partner in driving lasting, transformative change.*"

Tracy McPhail, Secondary School Principal,
Simcoe County District School Board, Canada

"The Purposeful Principal *is extremely relevant, allows for great reflection and dialogue, and has a practical structure that allows readers to turn ideas into action with great scaffolding.*"

Will Remmert, High School Principal,
Mankato Area Public Schools, MN

"*Principals matter. Research shows, other than teachers, principals are responsible for over 25% of school effects on student learning. Therefore, developing principals to be culturally responsive, equity-driven leaders is essential. It is essential to interrupt the interlocking systems of oppression that is a part of the history of public education.* The Purposeful Principal *is the practical guide every principal needs to read. Readers will immediately be able to gain knowledge and implement the strategies that serve students furthest from justice. This book is a testament to what is possible in our schools and is a must read for principals.*"

Melissa Sonnek, Senior Academic Officer, Minneapolis Public Schools, MN

"*The most effective school leaders understand that their role is to create the conditions in which great teaching and deep learning can thrive. This book illustrates that truth beautifully. Where there is joy, there is engagement. Where there is teacher support, there is strong morale. Where there is collaboration in learning, there is community. And where there are clear priorities, there are focused practices for allocating resources. The authors show how leaders—through focused instructional dialogue, intentional climate-building, authentic collaboration, and strategic use of people and time—can cultivate schools that are not only high-performing, but deeply human.*"

Jordy Sparks, Executive Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Student Supports, Oceanside, CA

"*What does it look like when a school leader truly believes that every student matters?* The Purposeful Principal: Practices for Leading Joyful, Successful Schools *answers this question with clarity and heart. It shows how leaders can affirm who students are, build classrooms where collaboration and care flourish, and create environments where teaching and learning respond to the real needs of children. What I found most powerful is the authors' call to embrace the both/and imperative. Leadership is not a choice between high expectations or compassion, identity or community. It is the art of holding both at once. In doing so, principals are reminded of their highest calling, which is to humanize students who have too often been overlooked. Their desire to be a human-centered leader is reinforced. Equally inspiring is their insistence on shared leadership: to give work back to the people, trusting that the best solutions emerge when communities shape them together.* The Purposeful Principal *is filled with concrete examples and practical exercises that help leaders move from belief to action, offering a roadmap for those determined to reconceptualize the system itself.*"

Peter Stiepleman, Author of *Serving as a Lead Learner: Powerful Reflections from America's Superintendent* and Host of *An Imperfect Leader: The Superintendents and Leadership Podcast*

"*This book grounded in historical and contemporary understandings will help principals navigate the complex and multi-faceted terrain of being an equity-minded principal with competence and care.*"

Alfred Tatum, Professor, Metropolitan State University of Denver, CO

"*This book offers a timely and practical roadmap for equity-centered leadership. Grounded in research and enriched by reflective exercises and real-world application, it equips school leaders—at every level—with the tools and insight needed to navigate today's challenges and build inclusive, student-centered learning environments. A valuable resource for any educator committed to lasting change.*"

Rodney Trice, Superintendent, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, NC

The Purposeful Principal

To Deshera Mack, Jerry Schmidt, Michael Kass, Melissa Sonnek, Dr. John Barrett, Jasmine Geter, and all of the other principals who brought students joy and success.

The Purposeful Principal

Practices for Leading Joyful, Successful Schools

Jamie Almanzán
Aaron Johnson
Graig Meyer

CORWIN

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Visit the companion website at
https://companion.corwin.com/courses/ThePurposefulPrincipal
for downloadable resources.

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Aaron—Wow! As a 12-year-old who was writing and creating on my grandmother's porch on the west side of Detroit, I once wrote, "One day my writing will sell." Even after I published my first book, I still didn't believe it and was reluctant to call myself a writer. I would like to thank my late grandmother, Annie Belle

Humphrey, my first reading teacher. Thank you to my mother, Lila Humphrey, for enduring so much emotional pain and trauma to just get me through. Thank you to my sixth- and eighth-grade ELA teacher, Willie Belle Gibson, a master teacher and literacy advocate. Thank you to my eighth-grade math teacher, Christopher Holstein, for saving my life in more ways than one. Thank you to John Barrett; you believed in me and encouraged me when many others didn't. I will forever be grateful for the ways in which you mentored me and set me up for success for my first job as a principal. Thank you to Alfred Tatum; your unofficial mentorship and encouragement made me believe that I could do this. Your simple message to me, "Write Fearlessly!" put me into beast mode. Until the day I die, I will write fire across the sky. Thank you to my family—Tiffany, my wife and my friend, and my children, Kailyn, Aminah, and Blake. Blake you were right, I *do* feel everything deeply and I'm ok with that because *that* is what makes me good at what I do. Lastly, thank you to the City of Detroit; your fires of resilience, your beautiful embers of culture, and the heat of your craziness forged me into a warrior. What up doe!

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About the Authors

Jamie Almanzán is a teacher, leadership coach, and partner at APC Leadership Collaborative. Prior to leading APC, he taught every grade level in K–12. He went on to be the director of learning and teaching at Pacific Educational Group in San Francisco and then a senior coach at the National Equity Project, a national nonprofit. Both organizations were focused on shifting the conversation in schools to address historical academic and experiential gaps for students. He has focused his career on working to ensure the promise of public education by supporting schools to serve every student. At APC Leadership Collaborative, he leads professional learning and coaches educational leaders to create more equitable learning environments incorporating observation, collaboration, and changing instruction to best meet the needs of all students.

Aaron Johnson is a writer–researcher–practitioner. In 2014, he started Archetype Consulting with the purpose to inspire educators to design schools that inspire academic excellence. He is the author of the 2018 Teachers College Press book *A Walk in Their Kicks: Literacy, Identity, and the Schooling of Young Black Males*; his dissertation *Understanding the In-School Literacies of African American Males Through a Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications for Teacher Professional Development*; and several articles in peer-reviewed journals. His current work includes research projects on literacy proficiency, curriculum writing, and codesigning

the instructional infrastructure of a school in the Metro Detroit area. Aaron's past experiences include being a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and higher education faculty, and those experiences aided in the writing of this book. His expertise and passion have taken him across the country and to Ghana to promote literacy proficiency and education cohesion. Aaron's consulting organization, Archetype Consulting, partners with organizations to facilitate professional learning, coaching, research projects, and parent engagement activities. You can find it at www.archetypeconsultingllc.com.

Graig Meyer is a social worker, educator, youth development specialist, coach, and partner in APC Leadership Collaborative. His work at APC specializes in coaching education and nonprofit leaders through complex change efforts, including those that have political elements. Meyer is the cocreator of the Students Six, a process for turning students into professional developers for their own teachers, which is now used by schools across the country. For 16 years, he led the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program, which was nationally recognized for sending 97.5% of its students to college. Meyer also served as the director of Student Equity and Volunteer Services for the Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC) City Schools. He is also a member of the North Carolina General Assembly.

Introduction: Leading Joyful, Successful Schools

Recall for a moment your most memorable K–12 school experiences. What stands out for you? Along with childhood friends, you likely remember specific teachers and other powerful adult relationships—good and bad. But do you remember any specific principals or assistant principals? Besides being *sent to the principal's office* do you have memories of what your principals did to make the school a better place for you and others?

Along with invaluable academic content, processes, and ways of thinking in school, schools are also places where children develop their multiple personal identities. Whether you recognize it, the principal leaders in your school community had an impact on the development of your learning, identity, and psyche. School leaders play an instrumental role in contributing to school culture and climate—which requires having the necessary skills for building environments that affirm students' multiple identities, including race, gender, and academic identities, among many, many others.

Effective school leadership has proven to be one of the most influential factors in improving the functioning of a school. The Wallace Foundation commissioned a two-decade longitudinal research study of school leadership that culminated in a research report (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). The study analyzed achievement data, examined school structures and human resource supports, school cultures, instructional practices, and the behaviors of school leaders. The researchers found that the most impactful variables on the success of schools was the mindset, preparedness, and skill set of the school leaders. In this 20-year study, four main behaviors of school leaders emerged that led to a positive change in school environments. The main behaviors of school leaders that have the greatest impact are:

1. They engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers.
2. They build a productive climate.

3. They facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities.
4. They manage personnel and resources strategically.

These are not distinct tasks, but ones that are decidedly overlapping and reinforcing. In this book, our goal is to provide you with activities and practices that you can do while on the job and that will advance your skill sets that support those four behaviors. We do this through a set of competencies originally inspired by the Wallace Foundation research, then codified by a group of North Carolina education leaders and adapted by the state's Principal Fellows Program, and further adapted by the authors.

As authors who are also educators, researchers, and practitioners, we believe that principals are the most important levers in any effort to improve the culture and climate of schools. They have the power to make academic, physical, social, and emotional spaces conducive to learning, all for the purpose of helping students to grow and learn.

Unfortunately, though principals yield this important power and have jobs and roles to carry out the business of educating students, they receive less professional development than almost any other person in their school building. And though most principals understandably balk at the many reasons they have to be away from their building, few of those external meetings are directly connected to improving their skills. Similarly, higher education principal-preparation programs are notoriously detached from actual school experiences. Most principal internships are simply trial by fire "you're an assistant principal now" experiences. When they do get the chance, we know that principals engage quickly and deeply in the opportunity to learn from each other about the craft of leadership. For most principals, their growth is primarily fueled by peer relationships. If you're a principal reading this book, we want you to have all of those peer relationships, a few great mentors, and professional development that is worth your time.

That's why we have developed a framework for meaningful, job-embedded professional learning for current or aspiring school leaders. This book is intended to get you to take action and learn while you are doing it. Reading the book may increase your awareness of how to be a better principal, yet improving your competency requires engaging in learning, applied tasks, and reflection.

We approach this book through a lens of applying what have long been called *equity principles* through real actions. As we write this book, we are surrounded by a national dialogue full of hostility toward the concept and application of equity. And yet, we believe that the role of schools and of principals persists through the tumult.

The conversation around equity-based instruction and antiracist practices in school environments has been prominent in the education sphere for over two decades. The current anti-DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) pushback is historically predictable, because every time education advances the liberation of Black and brown

people there has always been a White, conservative pushback. As authors, we admit that our reflexive reaction to the current political pushback has sometimes been angry and reactionary. This book is an effort to find a joyful, successful path forward for everyone who takes on the challenge of school leadership.

Upon reflection of our own work in the equity space, we believe there is a better path, and one that we hope to set in this book. We begin with the admission that equity advocates have too often wagged our fingers at persistent, systemic problems without frequently enough offering a realistic path forward. We need to shift from our work being mostly about problem diagnosis to about actions that improve students' lives.

To do so, we do not need to abandon the values of DEI—even as the term *DEI* gets weaponized. After all, the actual work of diversity, equity, and inclusion means taking actions to ensure that *every person (inclusion), no matter who they are (diversity), gets what they need (equity) to be successful*. No matter the politics swirling around us, schools will always have that mission.

However, we do not believe it is useful to wage a war over words. U.S. history has many lessons of generational struggle that should teach us that communities have always had to adjust their language and strategy in the prolonged search for justice. We should use this moment of political turmoil to spur the type of radical changes that we all know education needs to fulfill its promise to every student—and most especially those from populations that are so frequently left behind.

Principals must take actions that have clear connections to intended impacts. Sometimes, these actions should have an impact on their entire school, and sometimes actions should have an impact on individuals or specific groups of students. Although we still use some equity-era language throughout the book, our real effort is to support leaders to solve real problems with audacious actions. And to be clear, we believe this has always been and will always be the work of educational leaders.

The most persistent patterns in student achievement too often reinforce racist and biased myths that some students are inherently less intelligent than others. Sometimes education leaders quickly blame the students and their families for these patterns rather than examining our own system's flaws. Even using common language like "achievement gap" assigns the blame of school failure squarely on the shoulders of students and families and lets schools and educators off the proverbial hook. The truth is that student performance on standardized measurements is directly correlated to students having access to safe, positive, and effective learning environments. Through this lens, the principal's work must focus on the myriad ways that schools contribute to and sometimes even cause academic failure of the same groups of students over and over again.

Much of this book emphasizes the use of readily available *qualitative* data to determine how effective their schools are at educating students. We frequently hear educators say, "If you want to know how well your school is doing, ask the students."

Assessment data might show that students are performing at proficient and advanced proficiency levels, however that data does not measure climate and culture. Real stories from students and families tell a much richer story than simplified quantitative data. Unfortunately, the data that we do have almost always tells a story of racial inequality, closed opportunities for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, disproportionate discipline for students of color and students with disabilities, and families being disenfranchised.

Many principals are adapting their "equity" work to "belonging" work because leaders cannot ignore how students *feel* in school spaces. Students across this nation recount how they have experienced overt and covert racist practices and language, gender and gender identity bias; they are suspended and expelled for minor infractions, and they face the ubiquity of low expectations (Skiba, 2014). In our work as education consultants and practitioners, we often partner with public school districts across the nation to perform qualitative assessments that gather and document the real-life experiences of students who experience oppression at the hands of school staff. Much of the data that we collect highlights the pervasiveness of racism, classism, and overall inequities that are ingrained in schools. Below are some of the responses we've collected over the years from students:

- "I didn't feel safe here at all. In my classes, I would be the only person of color. I was so alone in those classes. So, when someone next to me would say the *n*-word, people think I'm annoying or opinionated but there is nothing done. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be walking through these halls."
- "I'm Hispanic and people call me a border hopper for some reason. They call me illegal but I'm legal. It's the same friend group that targets me. Some teachers defend me, but others can be right next to them and won't say anything."
- "In middle school, there was something in a book about Arabs and the teacher said—'All Arabs are terrorists.' I raised my hand and said 'I am Arab and I am not a terrorist.' She just stared at me."

Although these negative racial experiences do not represent the totality of students' experiences, we use them to illustrate that the racist, xenophobic, and ableist actions and language students encounter in school districts across the country are common. We frequently hear similar stories from other students regarding gender identity and sexuality, religion, special needs, and other marginalized identities.

Although experiencing the voices of students like those above in juxtaposition to the political climate, it's no wonder that school leaders often experience a feeling of being unsure of what to do. Even with hundreds of books available on educational leadership, there is no "to-do" list that can be effective without tools, coaching, and practice. This is especially true when principals need to engage in difficult conversations about student and family identity, particularly when it comes to race. The

conversation becomes even more challenging when you take into account other intersecting dimensions of identity, such as: physical ability, socioeconomic status, languages, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

With all of the challenges inherent in school leadership, we do not believe that anyone gets into education to hurt kids, nor to help the most advantaged students keep their advantage. For most educational leaders, the real issue is that they don't know how to close the gap between their intentions of helping all kids and the actions it would require to create truly equitable conditions.

This book is for education leaders who want to develop and hone the skills necessary for leading schools that try to give every student, no matter who they are, what they need individually to succeed.

Together, we will go on a journey to do the work—learning and growing as an adult so that you can better support children to grow and learn as well. Here, you will build your competency. Our work draws on research and real-world practice and expertise. Most important, we encourage you to do more than read: to take on the only thing that works when trying to change schools to meet the needs of students . . . practice.

Why Use Leadership Competencies?

The leadership competencies outlined in this book are designed to support your development as a problem solver and critical thinker. This work will enhance and add to the leadership skills you may have learned in your coursework or professional learning. Our hope is that they will help you in the transition from educating students to the role of supporting adults so that they can better educate students.

In each chapter you will find learning content, applied leadership activities, and reflection prompts designed to help you examine your own mindset, consider perspectives different from your own, and practice things that can help you become a more competent principal. By completing the work associated with the competency units in this book, you will have the opportunity to think and practice with some of the most challenging scenarios that you may encounter as a school leader. Our hope is that this book will support you to be better prepared and equipped to address the many challenges that you may face as a school leader, particularly those that are rooted in racism, homophobia, xenophobia, or othering of any type.

Coaching

Seeking coaching is key to the use of this book for your personal and professional growth. To explain what we mean by *coaching*, we use a sports metaphor because athletics often serve as an example of constant and ongoing feedback and the coaching of players over multiple years.

Upon a recent visit to the Basketball Museum at the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Chapel Hill, NC (the college home of Michael Jordan and several other notable basketball players), coauthor Aaron happened upon the display highlighting the college career of Michael Jordan. We could argue about who the best basketball player of all time is, however coauthor Graig lives in Chapel Hill, we will say that it is Michael Jordan. In 1982, Michael was to enter as a freshman to UNC in the fall of that year. He received a letter from UNC's legendary Coach Dean Smith that spring before graduating from high school. Coach Smith started the letter by saying,

"As I indicated in our meeting the last week of April, I am submitting to you things on which you should be concentrating during the summer months and prior to the beginning of practice on October 15. I do hope to see improvements in those areas listed below."

He went on to list 15 things that Jordan can work on to improve his overall game. Here are a few:

1. "Continue to work on your shooting form from certain positions where you usually shoot the open jump shot."
2. "Remember to keep moving without the basketball. You are much harder to defend if you stay on the move. Try to move intelligently and use the screen that is being set."
3. "In college basketball it is difficult to steal the ball from a dribbler. This summer work on guarding the dribbler where he cannot beat you and you stay in his path."

At the height of his NBA career, Jordan was a leading scorer, he had 138 career triple-doubles, over 2,500 steals, was voted as MVP six times, and had 14 All-Star appearances. Jordan later went on to become what many people refer to as the GOAT (Greatest of All Time). However, every book and documentary about Michael Jordan agrees on one thing: he always used and benefited from practice, coaching, and feedback.

Unfortunately, most educators, schools, and school districts aren't as open to being coachable like Mike or, for that matter, of mastering staying in coaching stances like Dean Smith and Jordan's NBA coach Phil Jackson. School and district cultures are rarely built around feedback and coaching. Feedback is often received as criticism and an affront to a person's expertise and is sometimes used in the evaluation process rather than a means to help one improve. We aim to change that narrative with this book.

We believe coaching is a powerful tool for school professionals. We encourage our readers to work alongside a coach who helps you understand who you are and to find answers within yourself, not to just tell you how they did it. You should choose

a coach who will pose questions to spur reflection, change, and develop alternate or additional perspectives. School leaders have found that access to a coach gives them a safe place to work through their insecurities, to interrogate their lack of experience with conversations around equity and help them collect valuable feedback that is not connected to their evaluation. Principals, as you work through this book, if you don't have a formal coach, we encourage you to find someone (or several people) who can act in that role for you. This work is intended for your own development. Find an accountability partner.

We practice what we preach. When embarking upon the task to write this book, we went beyond reliance on our experiences and understandings of the challenges that school leaders face. We partnered with practicing principals, university faculty, coaches, and consultants to provide feedback on the design of the competencies in this book. We vetted the competencies themselves, the content, and activities through students enrolled in principal preparation programs. When writing the book, we worked with an editorial team. We want feedback because it makes us better. We love working with people we trust enough to give us feedback in a way that feels supportive—even when it's hard to hear.

Who is this Book for?

The idea for our book came from a principal preparation program we assisted. Our partner in this work was the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program. The program leaders were amazing, ambitious partners in setting out a completely new vision for how to use competency-based education with their university partners. Over three years, we developed, piloted, and implemented these competencies with multiple universities across North Carolina. After consistent feedback around how in-service principals could benefit from some of this learning, we realized that a book could extend this practice to additional principal preparation programs and to any school administrator trying to improve their own skills for effective leadership.

We hope this book allows higher education programs in educational leadership to have a way to connect theory and practice. In our work as consultants, we've seen the competencies used in a variety of ways. Professors have used the competency activities as part of their syllabus. Some graduate students have chosen to use them for self-directed learning. And the best examples have been cases where the higher education program, graduate student, and internship host agree to use some of the competency activities to tie together classroom learning and internship experience.

School districts also could use this book with their in-service school leaders because principals often receive far too little professional development that is specifically targeted to their own jobs. At its core, this book is a leadership training curriculum that any school district could use with their school leaders. Try it with a group of first-year principals and see how they grow. With time, even your veterans might try to practice some new things.

How This Book Is Organized

To move research to practice, this text is constructed to be a usable guide for school leaders. Although the competencies, activities, and practices are research-based, we do not spend an inordinate amount of time in this text citing and referring to theoretical models or research. A research-base is important to underpin practice; however, we do not want to shut out leaders who might be turned off by a lot of research and theory without application. In essence, this book is about helping leaders to practice. Practice is the only thing proven to work to change school environments. Too often, leaders' libraries are filled with research-based texts that have little applicability in real-world situations and in everyday practice. This text includes modules that allow adult learners to move through content at their own pace. We took research-based leadership competencies and designed learning opportunities and activities that will allow you to explore new content (articles, chapters, podcasts, etc.), apply the learning in a real-world context, and extend your learning through further reflection and application.

Also, each competency is structured in such a way that it also allows for small-group or large-group collaboration.

- **Chapter 1, The Purposeful Principal** sets the context for a principal to get focused on creating a joyful, successful school for every single student. We ask principals to situate themselves within the historical context of education's patterns of success and failure. Then we ask for consideration of what we call an "Every Student Succeeds Mindset" which includes five learning conditions: Affirming Student Identity, Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment, Caring and Supportive Educators, Responsive Teaching and Learning Practice, and Equitable Learning Environments. We use these learning conditions to help purposeful leaders understand how to pursue a student-centered and success-driven approach. This chapter sets the stage to encourage the reader to begin this work with a journey of self-discovery, self-efficacy, and reflection about core values and behaviors.
- **Chapter 2, The Adaptive Principal** explores the concept of Adaptive Leadership as a key mindset and approach to leading the complex human change work necessary for schools to be joyful and successful. The chapter uses the competencies of Building Trust, Dialogue & Inquiry, Communication, Judgment, and Conflict Management to help you activate, consider, and develop relational skills that can be leveraged to help you lead the people in the complex work that goes beyond the policies, schedules, and practices of your school system.
- **Chapter 3, The Service-Oriented Principal** moves from the more adaptive skills required for effective leadership to focus on competencies that require technical solutions. The competencies featured in this chapter are Visionary, Systems Thinking, Change Management, Time Management, Delegation, and Organizational Ability.

- **Chapter 4, Inclusive Leadership and the Community** includes the competencies Customer Focus, Results Orientation, Responsiveness, Environmental Awareness, Global Perspective, and Creative Thinking and focuses the leader on better understanding and serving the community in which they work.
- **Chapter 5, The Self-Reflective Principal** takes the leaders through competencies that completes one cycle in the interactive process of building inclusive school environments. In this chapter, leaders use the competencies to reflect on their beliefs, behaviors, and actions in connection to how those impact the students and families they serve. The competencies featured here are Personal Responsibility for Performance, Personal Ethics & Values, Self-Reflection, and Sensitivity.
- **Chapter 6, Instructional Leadership for Every Single Student** focuses on preparing principals to lead their schools to be responsive, empowering, and supportive to students specifically, and the whole school community more broadly. The chapter provides some starting places for developing principals to be true instructional leaders. It focuses on the development of the climate needed and student-centered pedagogy. The competencies featured in this chapter are Learning Theory, Alignment & Structures for Adult Learning, Taking a Coaching Stance, and Student-Centered Learning Environments.
- **Chapter 7, The Audacious Principal.** Finally, the conclusion of the book suggests one critical competency for leaders who want to bring about transformative change and effectiveness: Audacity. What does it take to be audacious enough in your actions that you can make huge changes, knowing that you might also fail? And how do you respond, learn, and grow when you do fail?

How to Use This Book

Whether you are a practicing or aspiring school leader, we hope you will be drawn to the practicality of our work. Effective and purposeful leadership requires more than intellectual exercise, it requires real work. This book is meant to be used as a guide, manual, and workbook.

However, it should not be mistaken as a "how-to" book or a book to be followed in the traditional way or used as a perfunctory exercise. The vision for this book is to influence you to find the answers within yourself. This book leans heavy on building relational trust with colleagues, students, and community and to use those experiences to practice . . . over and over and over.

The book does not have to be read or completed in a linear manner. If you're reading and using it yourself, it is designed for you to progress in a specific order. We know that you will likely skip over some sections and dive deeply into others.

For anyone using this in a class or cohort setting, it may make sense to pick and choose sections to use. You will even find places where we recommend competencies that complement each other across chapters. Cohort learning will likely enhance your experience with this book in ways that we cannot even imagine, just as coaching will.

We cannot urge you strongly enough to undertake the actions in this book. Reading it and imagining what you might do can never substitute for actual effort and practice. Indeed, we encourage you to take the actions even when you are afraid that you might fail. Rather than shy away from failure, we encourage you to lean into it because that is where learning resides. When tackling the huge task of making schools more effective, you will encounter individuals, groups, and systems that seek to keep the status quo intact. Failure to transcend the status quo often encourages leaders to stop or pause their most ambitious actions. Thus, many inequities persist in schools because the adults often respond to failure by quickly moving on to something else. As a result of knowing this, it is important to reiterate the importance of working with a coach or accountability partner. This critical friend relationship has proven to be successful in multiple facets of life, jobs, roles, and industries.

The most practical part of how this book is organized is that every competency has preparation, application, and extension sections; thus, you can use this book and the sections of each competency in the following ways:

- Preparation
  - Engage with **all** of the media that is curated for this section.
  - Take notes and engage in individual or group inquiry about the meaning of the content.
  - Content linked in the preparation sections is intentionally chosen to enhance the experiences of leaders.
- Application
  - **DO** the activities that are suggested in these sections.
  - Approach relationships with care and receive and accept feedback from individuals that you connect with in the activities.
  - Keep accurate records, observations, and accounts about the successes and challenges of matriculating through the activities.
- Extension
  - These activities are some of the most important—they encourage the leader to continuously engage in self-reflection and apply your learning to future leadership opportunities.
  - Collect, record, and refer to written reflections in this section.

As a leader, you may find yourself slipping into compliance mode as you work to balance the demands of school leadership responsibilities and the rigor that the content within these competencies presents. Many of the competencies offer a choice, allowing you to pick the activities that fit your work schedule and level of desired engagement. Though you do have the option to pick, we highly recommend that you choose based on which you will benefit from most rather than which is likely easiest. The only way to get better and to stretch your practice and thinking is to engage in the multiple experiences, text readings, videos, and other media contained within each competency. We encourage you to push beyond what feels like the easy option and to stretch into your personal zone of proximal development. Our hope for you is similar to what we hope for students in school—a joyful and successful experience where your effort pays dividends beyond what you hoped.

One way to ensure rigorous learning is to adapt your engagement. If an activity asks for a journal reflection, but you feel it would serve you better to record your reflection in a conversation with your coach or accountability partner—do it! If you feel that expressing your reflection graphically better connects to how you are making sense of the concept—draw it! Find where the concepts are alive in the real context of your school environment and practice. There is no *right* way to engage with these competencies. We only ask that you commit to this journey and this work.

Now let's dive into Chapter 1, which we have structured as your first competency module. In subsequent chapters, you'll be exposed to multiple modules and tons of external resources, which you can pick and choose from to focus on your developing skills. In this first chapter, the Preparation–Application–Extension approach will be embedded within the chapter for you to get a sense and feel of the entire book.

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CHAPTER 1

The Purposeful Principal

"Our future will be increasingly determined by our capacity and our will to educate all children well—a challenge we have little time to meet if the United States is not to enact the modern equivalent of the fall of Rome."

—Linda Darling-Hammond

Across the world, cultural battles have long been fought through schools. Here in the United States, that includes efforts to withhold education from those who were enslaved, the implementation of unequal schools during the repression of Jim Crow, and the central focus of school desegregation during the Civil Rights era.

For those who were enslaved, marginalized, or otherwise oppressed, education attainment has always been the most important pathway to liberation. We discuss education similarly when we use economic terms—school is your *opportunity* for success, implying that it is your liberation from poverty. What we do not discuss as regularly as we should perhaps is how the condition of poverty is not the fault of the person or people, rather it is a biproduct and one of the vestiges denying literacy and education from whole segments of the population.

Schools are the institutions we most rely upon for molding our broad populace into one country. These instructions are our most important tools for positive integration. They are the practice ground for living up to our common goals; where we try to live up to national ideals like *e pluribus unum—out of many, one*. Schools are where we try to instill the principles and practices of democracy. Unfortunately, too many communities feel that education has failed that test because they feel left out of schools and democracy. Or if they are to achieve success in school, the experience of integrations is negative because they have to leave parts of themselves behind.

Consider what this means for *public* schools. Public means "of or concerning the people as a whole." When we use the word public to describe an institution or a space, we are indicating that every person should have fair and full access to that space and all of the opportunities that it offers. If you have chosen to work in public schools, it is likely that you did so—at least in part—because you believe that in our society everyone deserves "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and "equal

protection under the law." You likely believe that schools should be one of many American institutions that help one to feel protected, valued, and given the opportunities to attain their own happiness. It is a powerful calling! One so strong that we educators forsake the economic opportunity of other fields for the rewards of providing every child we encounter the chance for a joyful, successful learning experience.

Yet school leadership places us directly in the balance of a paradox—how can schools be liberatory and assimilationist? How can we help free our students from their limitations, while also binding them together as one? And how can we free ourselves of limiting beliefs about whether students and families *want* to fully assimilate into a culture that has a history of diminishing, devaluing, and dehumanizing them? These are all questions we have to ask ourselves when we interrogate our own perceptions about who school is for and how we begin to make them work for every student that enters the doors.

Most educators have no problem living in this paradox. In fact, we delight in it. And most educational leaders take steps up the hierarchy specifically because we have ideas of how to avoid the false trap of thinking that this is an either/or choice. We believe that it is a both/and imperative.

For the last couple of decades, our collective efforts in this direction have lived inside the label of equity work or diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI). As we stated in the introduction of the book, the work of DEI means taking actions to ensure that every person (inclusion), no matter who they are (diversity), gets what they need (equity) to be successful. In schools, we know that is our job and that it is in the service of living up to our greatest democratic ideals.

Another way to describe this work is educators' efforts to humanize the students who have been historically dehumanized. It is just that simple. When we deny students their human and civil right to a just and life-affirming education, we essentially deny their humanity. We humanize students who are racially marginalized by honoring their histories, cultures, triumphs, and challenges and value the journeys that have brought them to our care. We humanize students with special needs when we advocate that schools accommodate *their* needs rather than consecrate the systems that cast them into the oblivion of education nothingness. We humanize multilingual learners when we count their ability to think, communicate, and create in different sign systems as genius rather than expose our own self-loathing for not having the ability to do so.

The harder part of this work is to interrupt the places where educators are stuck in patterns that work against student success. The dark side of working for equity has been the difficult work of challenging inequity, all the way to its basis in racial discrimination, bias, and oppression. This is especially difficult because, generally, people don't go into education to harm kids, yet we all have worked in schools where

adults enact academic and social harm upon students in ways that likely exacerbate historic patterns of success and failure. Educators all have students of color, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners that we love and serve and teach. Simultaneously, we have all also perpetuated educational practices that withhold from students the joy, success, and liberation they deserve.

No matter the political winds swirling around education, the work of educators is set within a context where we must acknowledge the patterns of who succeeds and who doesn't, who has opportunity, and which highly predictable groups see opportunity withheld.

To do this, you must be *purposeful* in your pursuit.

Much of a principal's job is setting the vision and supporting the work required to improve the educational experience of those who are behind. The predictability of who those students are evokes anger from many, yet denial in others. Our perspective is that the principal must be the primary motivator in a school, and therefore the struggle—even failure—of any student should motivate your leadership to get stronger.

As the school's leader, principals also have to grapple with the way that long-standing achievement patterns are experienced by your students, families, and staff. For instance, though there are many forms of inequality within any school, you likely have community members who will point to racism as one of the most powerful ways that inequity persists and often the last to be addressed (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-Billings 2006).

The centrality of racial inequality sometimes gets challenged by the complexity of the many inequalities that persist in schools. Consider a student with the intersecting identities of being racially Black and having special needs who might not be served well along either of those lines. Contrast that student's experience with White or Asian students with special needs who are more likely to perform better academically and less likely to be suspended (Johnson, 2016, 2018; Porowski et al., 2014). None of those special education students may be performing as well or finding as much joy in school as they deserve. Improving the services of special education will likely help all of them, but the Black student still needs for the school to improve its services for Black students.

To further illustrate the point that a leader must be able to successfully address racism and racist practices within their school, Table 1.1 highlights disparities in reading, math, discipline, and graduation rates as evidenced by National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) taken at the eighth-grade level. We understand that inequity in schools shows up in many different ways and accosts students' intersectional identities. This table is used to support the point of how academic performance data clearly shows a disparity.

TABLE 1.1: NAEP DISPARITIES IN READING, MATH, DISCIPLINE, AND GRADUATION RATES

RACE/ETHNICITY	READING PROFICIENCY (% OF EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS WHO ARE DEEMED AT GRADE-LEVEL PROFICIENCY)		MATH PROFICIENCY (% OF EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS WHO ARE DEEMED AT GRADE-LEVEL PROFICIENCY)		DISCIPLINE (% OF STUDENTS K–12 RECEIVING ONE OR MORE OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION. THE MOST UP-TO-DATE DATA WAS FROM 2017)	GRADUATION RATE (% OF STUDENTS WHO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN FOUR YEARS)
	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED		
Aggregate (All)	**26**	**3**	**19**	**7**	**5.4**	**86**
American Indian/Alaska Native	**18**	**1**	**11**	**1**	**6.7**	**75**
Asian	**56**	**12**	**58**	**27**	**1.1**	**92**
Black or African American	**15**	**1**	**9**	**1**	**13.7**	**81**
Hispanic	**20**	**1**	**14**	**2**	**4.5**	**82**
White	**37**	**4**	**34**	**9**	**3.4**	**90**

SOURCE: (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017, 2020, 2022)

The racial nomenclature used here is what appears in several different databases, including the one we used, National Center for Education Statistics. There are many ways to identify people according to race and ethnicity, and some of those ways that we (the United States) have identified people are outdated or offensive. This points to the fluidity by which these racial labels are assigned to groups of people and helps us to further understand that race is a nonscientific, nonbiological way of categorizing human beings for political means and racial categories, as a product of the U.S. government, are malleable and arbitrary (Wilkerson, 2020). Throughout this book, we will use racial, ethnic, and language status to speak about groups of students; however, in no way do we presume that intellectual ability, proficiency, or IQ can be determined by a person's race, ethnicity, or social status. We use the language in this chart, and other language like this, for the sole purpose of illustrating the disparities between how students experience schools academically and socially along identity lines.

The data in Table 1.1 represents the percentages of students nationwide who were proficient or advanced in reading and math who took part in the NAEP. It also includes other data that was collected from school districts documenting suspensions and graduation rates based on race. It suggests that overall, regardless of race, as

a nation we are not helping students reach advanced levels of proficiency in reading and math; and when disaggregated by race, the picture is even bleaker for Native American, Latinx, and Black students.

We find similar trends when we compare how students are disciplined along racial lines. Black and Latinx students are suspended and expelled disproportionately to their representation in the school and are more likely to be suspended and expelled at higher percentages than their White and Asian peers, even for similar offenses. Because the data is clear and overwhelming about how students are disciplined according to race, we can also make the correlation between out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and low academic performance (as the Table 1.1 shows us).

After you read those statistics, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are similarly predictable disparities in graduation rates. And yet, it is interesting that the graduation disparities are somewhat lower, perhaps suggesting that even in the face of struggles throughout their schooling journey, students and families from all groups continue to highly value graduation as an outcome.

The persistence of this data over decades and across the nation leads some to believe that schools are inherently inequitable. That belief is based on an experience that persistent failure does academic, psychological, and emotional damage to students. Whether you agree with those beliefs, a school principal must contend with them. You must at the very least consider how your own school can break the pattern, how you challenge beliefs that perpetuate the status quo that tolerates the pattern, and how you advocate for systemic changes that can build new patterns.

And what about you and your mindset? Without a change in the mindsets of the people who either build or manage the inequitable systems, inequities will persist (Johnson, 2018; Tatum, 2005). However, it also requires more than a mindset shift. It requires leaders to work differently, to make hard decisions, to build strong teams, and to apply new practices.

At the classroom level, the most tenacious challenges are classroom practices that are deeply ingrained habits that disenfranchise students (Darling-Hammond, 2014). What inequity looks like in the broader educational environment includes hateful speech used by students, staff, and community members that causes real psychological harm to students. Inequity includes denial of access to honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes for students of color and other students who are oppressed. Inequity includes the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black students. Too often, inequity includes leaders who are reluctant, afraid, or who even outright refuse to have conversations, implement policies, and participate in actions that protect students' academic futures.

The pursuit of education for true liberation requires more than just giving students the tools to *overcome* a barrier. It requires collective commitment to *dismantling* barriers and reconceptualizing the system that created the barriers in the first place.

Education at its best is a step toward humanization and justice that mitigates against the structure that allows inequity to persist in the first place. Just as when you try to support a student to change bad habits to good ones, it's critical to replace old patterns with actions and structures that create better pathways to success. The role of a school leader is paramount in driving adults' behaviors, actions, and mindsets from the old to the new. This will be the hardest and most important work of your career. Your challenge is to help adults to grow and change so that they can better support children to grow and change.

It is reasonable to ask yourself and your authors what schools would be like if they succeed in replacing inequity with new patterns and pathways. We use two words and use them purposefully: *joy* and *success*. To us, *joy* is the manifestation of liberation combined with education. It is the feeling of being free to be your whole self and educated in ways that enable prosperity and purpose in your life. Success can be defined by the perspective you have. A high school teacher may view success as their students passing a test, their students may view it based on their engagement level, and the students' parents may wonder if it helps their child be ready for a job. What they all have in common, is a way to measure student progress toward standards we set. Joy and success are complementary in so many ways. They are the pairing of student experience and adult accountability. They are also the school's support for the soul and the mind. Even consider from the principal's perspective the pairing of your motivation for this field with your determination to make an impact.

What makes you a "purposeful principal"? This chapter serves as your foundational competency module, focusing on cultivating the mindset necessary for leadership of a joyful, successful school. Let's jump in.

Every Student Succeeds Mindset

The principal is committed to learning about a student-first mindset that is necessary for leadership of a joyful, successful school.

Preparation

This chapter is your first exposure to the Preparation–Application–Extension model for competency skill development we will use throughout the rest of this book. In this case, what you've read so far is the beginning of your preparation.

Journal

To deepen your preparation for the Application step, here are a few reflection questions for you to consider:

- What connections and correlations can you make between society at large to how schools operate?
- From what you know about your own school's student performance data, what conclusions can you come to?
- How have the schools you worked in perpetuated inequity? How have they mitigated it?
- What are the ways that you have seen schools replace patterns of inequity with practices that lead to joy and success for every student?

Write your thoughts below about the other ways you think inequities are manifested in schools

Review

Every Student Succeeds Mindset

Prior to launching into the remainder of the competency modules, this chapter targets priming the mindset of the school leader. In an attempt to live up to the model we suggested on page 19, we would ask you to consider a model for successful schooling that could replace many of the things we critique currently.

Below, we propose five research and practice-oriented conditions for building successful schools (PERTS – Project for Educational Research That Scales, Ahuvia et al., 2020; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Hattie; 2009; Johnson, 2018; NCES, 2001; Ritchie, 2013; Smith, 2017; Tatum; 2021). When pursued together, these five conditions can help you have a clear vision and approach to your school leadership. When you apply these practices in school settings while engaging in the activities outlined throughout the competencies in subsequent chapters, you will better understand and embody core values about equity and catalyze action toward sustainable change in your school.

REMEMBER THIS

Although all adults in education environments are integral in creating the conditions for student success, the principal is ultimately responsible for ensuring that other adults are fostering the components necessary to build successful school environments. As a result, school leaders should have the vision, courage, knowledge, skills, and determination to challenge inequity, build new systems, and create the conditions for successful schooling. May we suggest these five learning conditions that we call the Every Student Succeeds Mindset:

- Affirming Student Identity
- Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment
- Caring and Supportive Educators
- Responsive Teaching and Learning Practice
- Equitable Learning Environments ●

These conditions are not a checklist. They are more of an approach. Educators frequently ask, "Tell me what I can implement tomorrow" to make their schools and classrooms more effective. The truth is, that though there are thousands of things we can suggest they do, there is no set list or formula as equity is multifaceted and nuanced.

A purposeful leadership approach first requires developing a mindset that grounds your work in understanding the historical implications of inequities and their relationship to schools. This also includes focusing on effectively engaging the students in the communities you serve by developing an appreciation and respect for the community's history, culture, mores, and values; by interrogating who is served well in those communities; and by recognizing which students are not served or are disenfranchised by the system (and why) and what steps the schools needs to take to rectify any educational injustice.

This leadership approach involves interrupting the policies and practices that hold students back from learning, blocking access to opportunities, and centering students' identities so that they achieve academic and social power. Similarly, your leadership is critical to replacing those old practices with new ones that lay the path to joyful and successful learning environments. But what does this look like and how can you do it?

The challenges you will face as a purposeful school leader will be how to manage the complex human interactions required to interrupt the old ways of doing things and build new affirming environments that cascade beyond the fear of losing something—to gain the very thing that inspired us to be educators in the first place. Maintaining an open mindset about these core principles can help you avoid complacency with entrenched systems and provide you support as you grapple with the fact that neither you nor your school will ever achieve perfection—but you can almost certainly achieve joy and success. Your journey is an ongoing one, and the fight to fulfill the promise of education will be one that we will be engaged in for the duration of our lives. The support of these approaches will allow you to be consistent across multiple years of commitment, self-reflection, challenging and changing structures, and failure along the way.

As you consider the traits that follow, please think about them through the experiences of the students you serve—and particularly the students who are currently disenfranchised because of their racial identity, socioeconomics, geography, or perceived abilities. Whether you find these traits to be helpful for your leadership, try to use them to hone your own ideas of what the core experiences for students should be at your school. That mindset should be the heart and the moral drive behind your leadership. Everything else you do as a leader is in the service of driving toward those core beliefs that you carry with you.

Application

In this section, you will learn about five student-centered learning conditions. As you read, write down questions about how these apply in a real school, your own or another. After reading and collecting your questions, schedule a conversation with a principal or former principal in your personal network. Review the five conditions

with them and ask them your questions. We will provide you with an additional prompt for this conversation at the end of this section.

Affirming Student Identity

When students' unique and complex identities are validated through curricula, school culture, and relationships, it builds self-confidence, motivation, and connection (Gee, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2008; Heath, 1989). Educators who can demonstrate to students that they value who they are, help those students to see their individual identities as strengths in their own learning.

Human identities are complex and are developed as a way for us to see and make sense of the world and understand our relationship to it. We develop our identities through all aspects of our cultural experience—racial affinity, religious affiliation, sexual identity and orientation, gender, parental status, and geographic location, just to name a few. We all have intersectional identities that we can tap into depending on the context or situation. For example, a student in a school can identify as a scholar in one setting, a jock in another, and a musician in another. That same student can identify as Black, male, and gay. All of those identities independently and collectively make up who a person is and chooses to be. There are an infinite number of ways that human beings can identify themselves and all are equally valid. The most interesting part is that as humans, we reserve the right to morph and change how we identify, whenever we want. In fact, educators should help students learn how to develop their identities in ways that help them understand and process context in cultural spaces (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Guerra, 2007).

In addition to how humans identify each other, we also self-arrange into groups, helping us to assert our identities among others who identify similarly. Thus, even though the racial and cultural labels that are subscribed to us are arbitrary, we are often connected through our identity affinity. However, members of affinity groups are not monoliths as the arbitrary labels might suggest—the people within them make up diverse perspectives, identities, and belief systems. We all have intersectional identities and must be able to access our identities in ways that are appropriate for a particular cultural space—commonly known as "code switching." Because schools are public spaces, they are bound to provide for students the comfort to be able to assert those identities in ways that allow access to social power and access to academic content. As educators, it is not our job, nor do we reserve the right, to identify students in ways that suit our own worldviews. Reducing any person to a singular monolithic identity is something that all people reject, preferring to be recognized for all of the complexity that makes any individual brilliant and beautiful. It is our job to help them learn to be their full selves no matter what situation they are navigating.

Purposeful, student-centered school leaders must divest themselves of the notion that students' identities must fit into the strictures of a school's culture. If leaders don't break from this assumption, any student who fails to meet the culture's norms

will be doomed to failure, either socially or academically. Students' multiple identities should be affirmed and valued, and it is your responsibility to create the type of school culture that makes space for students and staff for this to happen. In short, their identities should shape the school's culture just as much as their identities are shaped *by* the culture.

Understanding students' developing positive identity traits is a key strategy toward supporting their academic success (Hanley & Noblit, 2009). A truly inclusive school will see students' identities through a strengths-based lens. For instance, a culture dedicated to a strengths-based approach will avoid any type of deficit language about Black students, instead emphasizing their inherent brilliance and seeing all of the funds of knowledge and cultural capital that their racial experiences, cultural background, and families instill in them. A culture dedicated to a strengths-based approach would then view our multilingual students as having the ability to communicate, read, and write in more than one language as genius rather than be disappointed, upset, or offended when students speak languages other than English in school spaces. Table 1.2 gives a sample of what language might look like in a strengths-based approach versus a deficit outlook on students' abilities, actions, or ways of knowing.

TABLE 1.2: DEFICIT OUTLOOK VERSUS ASSET-BASED APPROACH

DEFICIT THINKING OR FRAMING	ASSET OR STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH
"My students can't and don't read."	"We have emerging and developing readers and with some work, we will get there together. I will find the texts that encourage them to read more."
"I teach at-risk students."	"I teach students who have been denied opportunities, so I make it my job to expose them to more opportunities. I love to see how they respond."
"I have a lot of trauma kids."	"Some of my students have experienced trauma, and I will be patient and understanding of their situation."
"These Black girls have attitudes."	"We can learn a lot from Black women about how to be assertive and how to self-advocate. I want to understand these girls' perspectives and help them continue to advocate for themselves. Plenty of people in this world will try to cut them down, but I will not be one of those people."
"Our parents don't care about their kids' education."	"Many of our parents have several responsibilities on which they have to focus. I will be one of the advocates in their student's life to ensure that they are successful in school."
"I don't expect much, the kid has an IEP."	"Students with special needs have strengths and I will help them identify their strengths and they will be an asset to the entire learning community!"
"Students should be only speaking English in class."	"All languages are valuable. I am happy that we have students that are multilingual! How can we help them keep this ability as they grow and learn?"

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

Schools that foster an environment that promotes community and mutual support allow for students to share their ideas and opinions more freely. Perhaps more important, a supportive and collaborative learning environment helps them foster student ownership of their own learning and gain a feeling of joy from the experience. In environments like this, students are more likely to take on the challenges and hard work that leads to rapid growth, and they are better able to navigate the inevitable struggles and failures that happen along the way.

The leader of the school is responsible for constructing this type of positive culture by modeling it in the adult culture in the school. This includes communicating a common vision for an equitable learning environment, empowering everyone to act toward that vision. Along the way, it requires providing regular feedback to adults about their practices and growth trajectory.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) created a Coherence Framework that outlined four different domains that help to sustain and focus the attention of school leaders:

- Focusing Direction
- Cultivating Collaborative Cultures
- Securing Accountability
- Deepening Learning

The Cultivating Collaborative Cultures frame may be the most helpful in this discussion. Although we refer to *collaboration* in our domain as collaboration between student to student, and student to teacher/staff, cultivating collaborative cultures among staff cannot be detached from how educators create those same types of cultures that include student-to-student and student-to-staff interactions. Fullan and Quinn (2016) discuss how collaborative cultures are supported by a Culture of Growth, Learning Leadership, Capacity Building, and Collaborative Work. We hope you will explore these ideas across many of this book's competency lessons.

For students to connect to the school environment, they need to feel the agency and efficacy to do so. Students feel agency when they are properly motivated to participate in meaningful ways in the social and academic aspects of schooling. Students feel efficacy when they believe that they can be successful once they decide to participate in an endeavor. Students experience agency and efficacy when they feel physically and psychologically safe in the learning environment (Bandura, 2001; Gee, 2001). In his hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) outlines that humans need to feel physical and psychological safety first before moving up the hierarchy to reach self-actualization. Students often experience a disconnect with school when they do not feel they are a part of a supportive and collaborative environment. This can be misinterpreted as being unmotivated, not knowing or valuing the importance of

school, and having a limited command of the content, which essentially places the blame on the students for conditions they did not create.

In practice, student-centered school leaders can foster a more supportive and collaborative environment by instituting practices such as:

- identifying powerful discipline and instructional practices that are rooted in evidence of effectiveness,
- restorative justice or restorative practices,
- helping students design affinity spaces, and
- finding regular time for educators to converse about making the school environment into one that responds to the needs of all students.

Caring and Supportive Educators

Students who know that their educators care about them are more likely to take the risks required for successful learning—simply because we are all more likely to try something we might fail at if we know someone will be there to support us. Educators who provide instructional and emotional support help students feel safe, valued, and help them foster belief in their ability to learn the material. This component of building an equitable school environment is closely related to the Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment component. It takes a caring and supportive educator to build the type of environment where students feel valued, affirmed, and physically and psychologically safe.

From a research and practical application perspective, having caring and supportive educators is one of the most critical aspects of building an equitable school environment. Researchers and educators have written hundreds of books about the technical components of learning and the conditions inherent in a classroom that supports student learning. However, as a school leader, you *cannot* mandate that the educators within a system or a school are caring and supportive. Instead, you *do* have the power to provide standards by which educators should conduct themselves, provide access to coaching support, and give regular and ongoing feedback about educators' commitment to equity. It is just as important to have standards for reaching equitable outcomes for every student as it is to have academic and instructional standards.

In leading educators toward becoming their most supportive selves, it is important to guard against approaches that feel supportive but are patronizing or paternalistic. Patronizing approaches are those that seek to direct behavior without understanding context. Positioning yourself to make decisions on behalf of students or families because of your role, perceived best practice, or a level of expertise, can counteract any gains made when building an equitable school classroom and environment. Even well-intentioned educators can become patronizing when they are seeking a

shortcut to getting a student on track or to changing a classroom culture that has exhausted them.

A paternalistic approach involves adults who express their care for children through possessive relationships ("He's like one of my own") without truly knowing, understanding, or supporting the child's family or culture. In both cases, the educator takes away the agency and efficacy of the child, their family, and their culture. In essence, the educator puts themselves at the center of the relationship, rather than centering actions on the needs of the child.

Alternatively, caring and supportive educators put work into understanding individual students, their families, their community, and their culture. Although that takes work, the depth of understanding and relationship that is built promises major dividends in student performance. There are multiple competencies in this book that provide opportunities for this type of exploration. Turning this into practice can impact relationships, curriculum choices, classroom management strategies, and pedagogical practice. We have found that one of the most profound impacts of demonstrating true care and support is how it unlocks students' intrinsic motivation primarily through connecting to their family and cultural orientation toward school, achievement, and career pathways.

Responsive Teaching and Learning Practice

Ladson-Billings (1995) presented the idea that all teaching is inherently culturally responsive, the question is to which culture? The student's or the teacher's? The school's or the community's? The principal's or the parents'?

Student-centered school leaders set the tone for creating an environment where teachers set high expectations, build on students' existing knowledge, provide actionable tasks for learning, recognize progress and offer respectful feedback, and track progress from each student's starting place.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" set the foundation upon which we build *our* conception of culturally responsive teaching. Other conceptions of culturally responsive teaching have taken on other names and involve scholarship that added on to Ladson-Billings' work. We rely upon the work of Gay (2018) *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*; Paris and Alim (2017) *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*; Darling-Hammond (2014) *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*; and Hammond (2014) *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*.

Although we believe that all inequity has its roots in *racial* inequity, when we speak of culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, or culturally sustaining pedagogies, we encourage leaders to not just focus on just the racial or cultural backgrounds of students. Rather, leaders should approach culturally responsive

teaching by endeavoring to understand how and what students think, while understanding their thought processes and making connections to their racial or cultural heritages. Then as educators' developing understandings emerge, they can match content and instructional approaches to what the students need. Content and methodology should be relevant to students' lives, ensuring that it is reflective of their current reality and opens them to future possibilities.

Feedback and support should be culturally responsive as well. The way that leaders communicate with students and families about their performance on assessments is a window for engaging them in their learning journey. To wit, imagine if your standardized testing system was designed to provide families with more feedback about their child's strengths and the areas in which they need to improve. Indeed, your school *can* do this.

Finally, when considering teaching and learning, educational leaders are increasingly conscious of the ways their approach supports more than just academic learning, extending to include the full development of every child. The field of education has advanced far beyond the antiquated philosophy of just teaching the basic three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), but all educators know that the work of addressing curriculum and reaching academic standards has never been possible without also supporting physical, emotional, and social development.

Equitable Learning Environments

Equitable schools identify and challenge structural and individual barriers for students that prevent them from engaging in their own learning. This requires principals to recognize and interrupt historical patterns of marginalization that contribute to those barriers. Staff within equity-centered schools are always learning and challenging their biases, assumptions, and interrupting structures and systems that do not serve students. *Equitable schools are places where every student can experience their full human potential.*

This component of building equitable school environments is perhaps the most important and the most difficult to accomplish. Schools are the most recognized and widely-accessed institution in the history of this country, yet they were not initially built to serve every child. We have only recently endeavored to make schools serve every child. Educators, as purveyors of equity and justice, must dismantle old structures and mindsets that have built schools as inequitable institutions and redesign and reconstruct them in ways that might seem foreign to us.

In fact, not only are there structural barriers in schools that perpetuate inequity (racism, xenophobia, sexism, linguistic discrimination, etc.), but also staff often then adhere to and follow many unwritten mores that are invisible in written policies but have a real effect on students. For instance, there is most likely not a policy prohibiting students of color from accessing AP and IB classes, but over the last decade almost every school system in the country has set a strategic goal to address the

disproportionate numbers of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students who are disenfranchised from these courses. There is most likely not a written policy that compels schools to suspend and expel more Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students; however, the data consistently demonstrates that more of these students are disproportionately disciplined and that the zero-tolerance policies in codes of conduct are applied subjectively and impact these students more negatively. These behaviors, among others, create school environments that do not cultivate the genius, creativity, and funds of knowledge that students have and can use to be successful in their lives (Moll et al., 2005; Muhammad, 2020).

It rests upon your shoulders to work in collaboration with your teachers, students, district officials, and the rest of the school community to reconceptualize schools in ways that are devoid of racist, homophobic, and xenophobic practices, that support and affirm the identities of the students who they are meant to serve. Similarly, schools should break down structures that seem to work overall but are impediments to the students who need access the most. Your ability to build equitable learning environments will only happen with practice. Since this component is critical to the successful creation of equitable schools, it is important to reemphasize here the significance of working through the competencies and their activities in their entirety.

Finally, we know there are many who say that an emphasis on equitable learning environments is inherently unfair or harmful. We ask those people one question and offer one challenge. The question is: How would you address historical patterns of inequity without knowing what they are, knowing how to address them, and being unsure of how to track your success? The challenge is: Describe a joyful, successful school for every single student that does not address its challenges.

Extension

As we shared on page 21, your first application task is to have a conversation about these ideas with a principal. Introduce the five learning categories to the principal and share the questions you have collected.

We also encourage you to have this conversation with a principal:

Share with your conversation partner the thoughts you have about your own school through the lens of these categories.

- What are you doing and doing well?
- Where are you struggling?
- Do you have any advice on actions I can take to make key or quick improvements?

Developing your approach to these components of building successful school environments is crucial to your success as a principal. It does the leader no good to enter

into the competencies and to begin working on activities without a basis to understand why they are important in the first place. Before moving on, we encourage readers to go back through each one of the components of The Every Student Succeeds Mindset and to write a short commitment statement for each one.

After reflecting on the reading on pages 20–28 and your conversation with another principal, we ask you to consider your commitments to building a school where every student succeeds. What are the commitments you make to the students and the school community that will guide your leadership?

This does not have to be anything fancy. It can be as simple as a bullet list, or as extensive as a personal statement. These commitment statements will help to set the groundwork and the purpose behind building up the skills that the competencies in the rest of this book call for. As a great leader, you figure out how to accomplish this monumental task by encouraging, influencing, organizing, strategizing, learning, and getting back up when you fail. We believe that you can become competent at all of the skills that we outline in the upcoming chapters by committing to affirming students' identities, building supportive and collaborative learning environments, coaching supportive and caring educators, understanding and supporting responsive teaching and learning practices, and building equitable learning environments. What do you believe?

Write your commitment statement below.

Commitment statement:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Summary

Developing your approach to ensuring every student succeeds is crucial to your success as a purposeful leader. This mindset is designed to ground you as you approach developing specific competencies across the remainder of this book. Your first commitment as a purposeful leader has to be a clear commitment to students and delivering what they need. From there, you figure out how to accomplish this

monumental task by encouraging, influencing, organizing, strategizing, learning, and getting back up when you fail.

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