

DISCOVERY EDUCATION *EQUITY TALKS*: FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS REPORT

This research report explores equity in education with exclusive insights from Discovery Education's *Equity Talks* webinar series.
Created in collaboration with McREL International.

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DISCOVERY EDUCATION EQUITY TALKS: FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS REPORT

Discovery Education – Equity Talks is a live webinar series featuring the nation’s top educational leaders as they engage with one another in a virtual environment.

Purpose and Overview

From April to June 2020, Discovery Education facilitated *Equity Talks*, ten equity-focused webinars led by educators, including superintendents and Board of Education members, throughout the United States and Canada. Discovery Education’s *Equity Talks* were designed to provide guidance and support to educators across the country and internationally who are struggling with issues of equity that, while always a topic of concern, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to rely on distance learning. Each panelist spoke about equity issues facing their districts, particularly in light of COVID-19 and school closures.

The webinars were framed by five overarching questions:

1) How are school leaders cultivating equity and excellence in the wake of nationwide school closures, especially for the most vulnerable students?

- 2)** What challenges and opportunities exist for schools and school leaders during the pandemic?
- 3)** How are school leaders planning for new allocations of staff, time, and resources?
- 4)** How are schools and school districts assessing the needs of students and families?
- 5)** What are the budget implications of the closures on states, districts, and schools?

Over the ten webinars, panelists and attendees produced rich conversations about the current state of education, specifically how school districts address the issues of school closures and create plans for students to return to schools in the fall, whether they returned in-person, returned remotely, or implemented a hybrid of the two. Held live, the webinars allowed attendees to ask questions and participate in the conversation using the chat feature. The webinars raised many challenging questions that districts will continue to face in the weeks and months ahead.

“We have to take this opportunity of crisis and use it as a catalyst for real change.”

Webinar Participant

“The great disparities in American society (in terms of race, access to resources, health economic and social stability, etc.) are very apparent in our educational system.”

Webinar Participant

Because of the vast scope of the webinars, Discovery Education asked McREL International, a not-for-profit education research firm, to review and summarize all ten webinars and conduct four interviews. Interviews were completed with one of the Discovery Education leaders on the project, a co-founder of the series who facilitated the webinars, and two superintendents who served as panelists.

Beginning with a brief literature review of equity issues in education, the report then summarizes general findings, trends, and insights from the ten webinars. The last section provides conclusions and recommendations.

Review of the Literature: Equity in Education

In *Equity Talks*, panelists and participants discussed a wide range of issues and concerns facing educators today, especially issues of equity within the current educational system. Educators must look to research and each other to share ideas about policies and practices that they think may address these issues while meeting students' and families' educational, social, emotional, and fundamental needs. This brief literature review highlights some of the most common themes discussed throughout the webinars supported by current research or policy findings.

COVID-19

To provide context for the webinar series and the current state of education, the literature review begins with a synopsis of how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting students and their families, especially students and families of color. Although there have always been issues of equity in education, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting school closures exacerbated those inequities. As of August 2, 2020, there have been 4.7 million reported cases of COVID-19 infections in the United States, with more than 157,000 deaths (NAS, 2020). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that children account for approximately 5 percent of symptomatic cases (Bi et al., 2020), and most positive COVID-19 cases are found in people aged 18-64,

which suggests that teachers and other educational staff may be more likely to contract and/or transmit the disease (NAS, 2020). Black and Hispanic/Latinx persons account for a disproportionate quantity of COVID-19 cases, representing 55 percent of total confirmed cases when these demographics comprise one-third of the United States population (NAS, 2020). American Indians and Alaska Natives are also disproportionately impacted, with the highest hospitalization rate of any group (193.8 per 100,000) (NAS, 2020). This alludes to inequitable factors that may amplify safe-return risks, such as limited access to testing. Enclosed and populated areas pose a particular threat to viral transmission, given that there can be upwards of three additional infections due to secondary exposure (i.e., through contaminated surfaces) for every primary exposure (i.e., infectious droplets or aerosol) (NAS, 2020).

As a result of these serious health concerns, all schools in the U.S. were forced to close in the spring of 2020, substantially transforming the education landscape. School districts across the country had to quickly adopt new measures to ensure continued learning for students outside of the traditional classroom. The rise of distance or remote learning brought to the forefront longstanding concerns about educational equity, specifically the fact that not every student can participate in remote learning due to a host of challenges. The most significant barrier to effective education is the lack of internet access or dedicated home devices which disproportionately affects underserved students; however, appropriate technology is only one of the challenges that educators and students are facing in the midst of transition to distance learning.

Another major concern related to the shift to distance learning is whether and how educators can continue to implement research-based educational practices that have been shown to keep students engaged in learning and promote their social-emotional and academic well-being. Specifically, traditionally underserved students (e.g., students of color and/or from low income families) are the ones who benefit most from interpersonal connection,

extra support (both academic and socio-emotional), and additional resources provided by traditional schooling. How can educators form strong relationships with their students? How can they help students who are struggling academically and/or personally? How can they ensure that all students have the resources they need to succeed? These are just a some of the questions that educators are grappling with in the midst of transition to distance/remote learning, and equity is at the forefront of all of them.

While far from exhaustive, this review is intended to provide a contextual basis for the importance of these topics and why their consideration is essential for promoting and preserving equitable educational environments for students.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Cultural competency seeks to develop a deeper awareness of cultural identities by honoring the differences among cultures and viewing diversity as a benefit, as well as interacting knowledgably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups (Burns et al., 2005). Furthermore, cultural competency involves the “ability to work effectively—and sensitively—across cultural contexts. It involves learning, communicating and connecting respectfully with others regardless of differences. Culture can refer to an individual’s race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status and age, among other things. All these factors strongly influence people’s lives and experiences” (Teacher Leadership).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), which has roots in sociocultural theory and the works of Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and others, is based on the notion that culture is central to student learning. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a shift from Multicultural Education, which works to change school environments so that they align with the diverse populations of their schools and reflect the many cultures and groups in schools and communities. Multicultural training lacks the breadth and sophistication needed to properly prepare educators for a diverse classroom. Oftentimes, multiculturalism sought only to compare similarities and

not look for differences among cultures, encouraging students to be colorblind.

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings, who defined the theory and practice of CRP through her study of exemplary teachers of African American students (1994), CRP is “an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” Research finds that CRP and positive racial identity can play major roles in promoting academic achievement, specifically for youth of color (Hanley & Noblit, 2009). A 2005 study found that students of teachers trained in culturally responsive teaching methods had greater opportunities to learn, received more appropriate instruction, and were more engaged in learning tasks than peers of non-trained teachers (Burns et al., 2005). More recently, Cholewa et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative case study that revealed an association between culturally responsive educational practices and increased psychological well-being among students of color. In another study, Byrd (2016) examined the effectiveness of CRP by considering student perceptions of classrooms that varied in the amount of culturally relevant practices, finding that elements of culturally relevant teaching were significantly associated with academic outcomes and ethnic-racial identity development. Furthermore, a study by Larson et al. (2018) revealed an association between observations of culturally responsive teaching and proactive behavior management practices, with observed positive student behaviors in classrooms. Amongst a limited number of studies showing a causal effect of CRP, Dee and Penner (2017) found that student assignment to an ethnic studies curriculum, which is considered an example of CRP, increased ninth-grade attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 points, and credits earned by 23. These surprisingly large effects suggest that CRP, when implemented in a high-fidelity context, can provide effective support to students.

While studies on the effectiveness of CRP are promising, moving from a conceptual understanding of cultural responsiveness to putting effective CRP into practice poses

a challenge to many educators, especially during a time when face-to-face interactions are not possible. Educators might wonder how they can create or maintain relationships with students from a distance. In recent thought pieces published by the Institute of Education Sciences, Malik (2020) and Holquist & Porter (2020) urge educators to take into consideration potential opportunities that distance learning may afford for cultivating CRP. Following are practical examples gleaned from these thought pieces and other literature on promising practices (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Kransnoff, 2016; Piazza et al., 2015; Trumbull & Pacheo, 2005):

- View the transition to online learning as an opportunity to incorporate new resources that encourage full and equal participation from all students. The fact that educators must rethink their instructional practices and resources for the purpose of distance learning provides an opportunity to improve schools' response to equity issues. For example, teachers may consider whether potential online resources are provided in multiple languages to support English Language Learners (ELL), whether the learning experiences reflect the cultures and values of their students, and whether they are structured in a way that allows students, whose parents may be essential workers and unavailable to support them during the day, to complete the activities self-sufficiently.
- Focus on building relationships with students and families from a distance. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, educators can still make meaningful connections with families via phone calls, text messages, and/or email. They must keep in mind that families may be experiencing stresses and anxieties that could impede learning, making consistent check-ins with families that much more important. If teachers must connect digitally with students who are at home to facilitate their learning, they can use that as an opportunity to better connect with their families as well.
- Incorporate social justice and community issues into instruction. In times of uncertainty and stress, students might feel empowered by the opportunity to think of ways to promote social justice in their communities. For example, an art teacher might ask students to create digital art depicting racial injustice that can be shared on social media.
- Promote student engagement by building on student experience. Like adults, students are coping with the sudden changes brought on by the pandemic. Teachers can look for opportunities to allow students to process their experiences and emotions related to COVID-19, such as writing a poem, creating a work of art, constructing a timeline, or exploring scientific advances related to finding a cure or vaccine for the virus.

Diverse Teacher Pipelines

The National Center for Education Statistics estimated that White teachers comprised 80 percent of the teacher workforce in 2015/2016, which was down from 83 percent in 2003/2004 (NCES, 2019). However, the percentage of Black teachers decreased from 8 percent to 7 percent from the 2003-2004 school year to the 2015-2016 school year, while the percentage of Hispanic teachers increased from 6 to 9 percent, and the percentage of Asian teachers increased from 1 to 2 percent. This same report cited a key study that found students who are taught by teachers who look like them have more positive attitudes, motivation, and academic success (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). However, another NCES report shows that students of color are no longer in the minority: They comprise 53 percent of the student population. Youth between prekindergarten and grade 12 are 47 percent White, 15 percent Black, 27 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, 1 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, 1 percent Pacific Islander, and 4 percent two or more races (NCES, 2019). There is a clear difference between the percentage of teachers representing diverse backgrounds and what is reflected in the youth population.

“If we’re talking about the racism in schools, we’re talking about the ways in which it has direction – and racism recruits us; it actively recruits. Homophobia recruits us. Patriarchy recruits us. It tries to get us to buy into these systems to normalize them, and our job is to disrupt them.”

*Dr. Mark Bedell,
Kansas City Public Schools*

School districts can take steps to increase the diversity of their teaching force, and the hiring process is the first lifeline. As noted by Dr. Sean Bradwell, the Board of Education Vice President of Ithaca City School District, “One thing we can do is ensure that we are hiring superintendents who understand the oppressive nature of our systems.” This idea was echoed by Dr. Tiffany Anderson, the Superintendent of Topeka Public Schools, when she shared in the webinar that each newly-hired leader in her district visits the local prison to better understand the school-to-prison pipeline. “Unless you address the mindset of the individuals that are teaching and leading your children,” said Anderson, “you will continue to have racist practices, and you will continue to have access and opportunity denied.” Superintendent of Kansas City Schools (KCS) Dr. Mark Bedell shared that he was able to address the needs of his students by examining systemic issues. KCS dispatched Wi-Fi equipped busses to students living in Wi-Fi deserts, provided mobile phones to homeless students, and offered meals to food insecure students and families. These are just a few examples of how leaders of color provide innovative solutions because they understand the unique needs of the oppressed, and the benefits affect staff, as well. Teachers feel more supported in their role and are less likely to leave teaching as a profession when there is diverse leadership that understands the unique connection between diverse teachers and the long-term success of diverse students (Dixon, Griffon, & Teoh, 2019). Diverse teachers are in a unique position to understand “what students of color will face after graduation” and how to best prepare them (Dixon et al., 2019).

To diversify the teacher workforce, The Teacher Policy Team in Connecticut made three recommendations that depend on creating new systems: (1) Ensure that culturally relevant standards-based teaching is integrated in curriculum and professional development throughout the district; (2) Pilot teaching assistant programs for high school students of color to broaden the base of teacher color candidates; (3) Create incentives and supports to retain teachers of color in schools and the community (Educators for Excellence,

2018). Similarly, the Minnesota Teacher Policy Team on Teacher Diversity made nine recommendations that fell under the broad umbrella categories of recruitment, induction, and retention (Educators for Excellence, 2015).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)/ Trauma-Informed Education

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined social-emotional learning more than two decades ago as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a common theme in discussions of educational best practice. However, to be effective, SEL also must be approached through an equity lens. According to EdTrust (2014), SEL “approaches that lack an explicit equity lens, that fail to acknowledge the role of students’ racial and cultural experiences in social-emotional development, that treat social-emotional and academic learning as separate, or that fail to address the processes and structures in schools that disadvantage students of color, low-income students, and immigrant youths systemically may do more harm than good” (p.1).

Thus, schools need to be intentional about addressing the socio-emotional needs of students. Recent research demonstrates concerns about why vulnerable students may be at-risk if schools do not re-open, but the research also raises concerns about students’ well-being, even if students return to physical campuses. Research in 2020 by the National Academies of Science (NAS) concluded that K-5 students with special needs are particularly vulnerable if a return to in-person learning does not occur in the fall of 2020. Yet, vulnerable students, such as those in marginalized communities, do not always receive the support they need when they are in school. According to studies, students of color, when compared to White students, are less likely to report that they feel they can turn to a teacher or a counselor for mental health support (Croft,

Hayes, and Moore, 2016). Specifically, Black students are nine percent less likely to report a teacher they can turn to, and Hispanic students are 6 percent less likely (Croft et al., 2016). Furthermore, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students are 3 percent less likely to report a counselor they can rely on (Croft et al., 2016).

Recommendations for serving marginalized students include: (1) Use a strengths lens that celebrates assets and upholds expectations; (2) Explicitly discuss bias and the link between beliefs and behaviors; (3) Use research-based approaches that integrate SEL into all areas of learning; (4) Transform the entire learning environment to becoming more equitable and culturally responsive through policy and practice (EdTrust, 2014). If educators can integrate these elements of SEL into their instruction, they may be better able to meet students' needs.

Digital Divide

Although digital learning has been in existence for over two decades, little research provides answers to the most effective way to implement and conduct digital learning. Based on 2015 U.S. Census Bureau data, the Pew Research Center found that 15 percent of U.S. households with school-age children did not have high-speed internet at home (Anderson and Perrin, 2018); yet, six in ten eighth graders report that they use the internet for homework every or almost every day (Auxier and Anderson, 2020). The percentage of U.S. households without internet increased to 25 and 23 percent for Black and Hispanic households, respectively, and 35 percent for households with incomes less than \$30,000. In a survey conducted in spring 2020, the Pew Research Center also found that 25 percent of Black teenagers and 17 percent of Hispanic teenagers reported that they are unable to complete homework because of a lack of a reliable computer or internet connection, compared to 13 percent of White teenagers. Although 12 percent of all teenagers surveyed reported they use public W-Fi to do homework because of lacking internet at home, that percentage jumped to 21 percent for Black teenagers (Anderson and Perrin, 2018).

According to the most recent data by the National Telecommunications and Information Association (NTIA), about 19 percent of households do not have internet because it is too expensive, which amounts to nearly five million households (NTIA, 2019). While 82 percent of households with an annual income of \$100,000 or more report home internet use, only 57 percent of households earning less than \$25,000 per year report internet use. In addition, while 75 percent of White households report internet use, only 64 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native households do (NTIA, 2019). Hispanic households are most likely (25%) to report that internet access is too expensive (NTIA, 2019). Thus, there are opportunity gaps based on income and race/ethnicity. On the other hand, only three percent of households cannot access internet due to availability in the area, which amounts to about 850,000 households (NTIA, 2019). While this poses a unique challenge for rural areas, it is less predictive of internet use than income.

This is not a new problem. Even in 2005, researchers argued that strategies that hope to address the digital divide must also acknowledge "symptoms of racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism and ableism" (Gorski, 2005; p. 35). Gorski goes on to add, "The digital divide, like gaps in expectations and pedagogy, is sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural in nature, and can only be dismantled through movements that address it on those levels" (p. 35). Given the recent racial protests and activism calling for social justice across the country, these words ring true today.

Beyond students having access to technology and connectivity, educators, particularly teachers who work with students, also must be comfortable using technology to teach students effectively. In a study that focused on exploring the digital divide between students with low and high socioeconomic status in Florida, the authors concluded that there was, indeed, a digital divide. They proposed three ways to close this divide: (1) Schools without technological resources need to find ways to develop the infrastructure and obtain the software, hardware, and other necessary technological devices needed

to be on par with their peers; (2) Teachers need to know how to integrate technology into their lessons and have ample time to learn how to integrate it successfully; (3) The skills of family members should be increased through collaboration and partnership with the schools (Hohlfeld, Ritzhaupt, Barron, & Kernker, 2008). These strategies are even more important today as educators, students, and families transition to full-time online instruction.

An EdSurge article (2015) described ways that communities could “think outside the box.” They noted that Los Angeles created a partnership between its local PBS station and the Los Angeles Unified School District, which allowed students to watch episodes of *Nova* and Ken Burns documentaries. The programming had been mapped to the state standards to ensure that students were still on track with the curriculum. The EdSurge webpage also noted that the British International School in Hanoi, Vietnam created “take-home boxes” for students that included Play-Doh and craft materials (Noonoo, 2020).

Resources

Infrastructure

The National Academy of Sciences reported that school infrastructure is important for a healthy and equitable return to school, but creating quality infrastructure was problematic before the COVID-19 pandemic. Infrastructure issues range from poor air quality to dilapidated parking lots to inadequate plumbing in bathrooms (NAS, 2020; ASCE, 2017). The 2017 Infrastructure Report Card by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) found that 24 percent of permanent buildings in public schools are in “fair or poor condition” and approximately 31 percent of temporary buildings are in similar conditions (ASCE, 2017). In addition, there is a correlation between poor infrastructure and the family income of students (NAS, 2020). Overall, more than half (53 percent) of schools require repairs or renovation to be considered in “good” condition (ASCE, 2017), which has serious budgetary consequences if schools are to meet evidence-based standards for the prevention of COVID-19 (NAS, 2020). In

addition to infrastructure, schools must consider other preventative measures, such as providing surgical masks to all staff and students (NAS, 2020).

Per-Pupil Funding

A study from 2015 found that an increase of 22 percent of per-pupil spending for low-income children across all 12 grades would be sufficient to close the educational attainment gap caused by socioeconomic status (SES) (Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2015). Some estimates predict that a funding increase of this magnitude would increase the graduation rate by 20 percent and result in about one year of extra educational attainment for low-SES scholars (Jackson et al., 2015). The model also suggested an increase in adult wages and lower rates of poverty later in life, meaning that investments in K-12 education have broad and long-term societal benefits (Jackson et al., 2015).

Beyond increasing funding, it is also important to consider how money is spent. Studies suggest that small class sizes (Mosteller, 1995) and increased teacher wages for qualified candidates (Ferguson, 1991) have large impacts on students’ success.

Supporting Early Childhood Education

Research suggests that early childhood education (ECE) can also reduce academic gaps for students coming from low socioeconomic status and lead to long-term academic improvement. A key study found overwhelming positive results for students who enrolled in an ECE program, compared to their peers who did not receive ECE. This project demonstrated the valuable impacts that investment in regular, high-quality ECE and care can have on the educational and life outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (High Scope, 2020). The study found that African American three- and four-year-olds living in poverty who received high quality ECE services (quality defined and directed by variables including educational backgrounds of ECE staff, length of programming, active learning curriculum, etc.) from 1962 to 1967 reportedly experienced better outcomes later in life (e.g., 20 and 40 years later), as compared

"I believe that some school leaders are doing an excellent job of fostering equity among students and staff. However, there is still work that needs to be done everywhere! These conversations cannot stop, and it must become part of a school district's/campus's culture across all parts of this country."

Webinar Participant

to the control group (i.e., children who did not receive the same ECE services). Major outcomes include the completion of nearly one additional year of schooling, less time receiving special education services, higher rates of graduation, 50 percent fewer teen pregnancies, 46 percent fewer jail or prison arrests, and a 42 percent higher median monthly income. The evidence garnered from this project is indicative of the value of financing high-quality ECE programming, particularly to foster equitable outcomes from which children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may thrive later in life (Heckman et al., 2010).

Leadership

Research also shows that leadership is key in schools and school districts that have positive student results. Leadership is primarily focused on "providing direction" and "exercising influence" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 20). Leaders play a critical role in redesigning organizations during pivotal times (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leaders affect students as well. Among school-level variables, leadership accounts for about 10 to 20 percent of the variation in student learning (Creemers & Reezigt, 1996). Other studies have demonstrated that principals who follow certain "leadership responsibilities" (p. 22) can increase student test scores by up to ten percent (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), an improvement that is critical for all school district leaders, whether they are from small or large, high- or low-income communities, or rural or urban districts. Strong leadership that aggressively promotes equity for all students will be the key determinant in making systemic changes that will allow the same opportunities for all students.

“We will emerge from this experience as better [educators].”
Webinar Participant

“We need to change the hearts of people if we want to see lasting change. We need to create space for intense discomfort... getting comfortable with being uncomfortable... and we have to watch out for unintentional biases.”
Webinar Participant

Findings and Insights

Q1: How are school leaders cultivating equity and excellence in the wake of nationwide school closures, especially for the most vulnerable students?

The *Equity Talks* webinar series was designed to promote conversations that emphasize the need for action and the need to actively choose to fight against systems of oppression that create inequities for students. Throughout the webinars, panelists and participants named inequities that exist in every school system in the United States. They acknowledged that we have not done enough to create safe, antiracist spaces for the most vulnerable students. To address these issues, leaders must promote courage and use their power to transform systems.

A key theme throughout the webinars was the importance of educators telling their stories with authenticity. This is an opportunity for Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) leaders to wear their culture, professionalism, and emotionality on their sleeve to point out inequities and create hope using real human experiences.

Several examples of leaders who are enacting practical solutions were shared throughout the webinars. For example, the Kansas City, MO school district is sending laptops and internet-equipped buses into Wi-Fi deserts. New York City Public Schools is providing meals to students and families most in need, and Shenendehowa Central School District in New York has distributed more than 200,000 meals. Additionally, New York leaders are exploring a state-wide learning management system to support pedagogical shifts to reach all students. In Virginia, leaders secured a partnership with an AM radio station to provide live instruction in Spanish on the radio.

During school closures, school leaders have focused on building and maintaining strong relationships with all students, even while apart. They expressed the importance of students feeling connected to educators, the school, and their community to serve equity and excellence. Although school

closures have made it more difficult to engage some students, leaders said they will not accept complacency; staff must maintain outreach and engagement efforts to demonstrate to students that they care.

School leaders are constantly reflecting on equity and access and seek to have all staff do the same. They encourage staff to meet the needs of students and their families. Many school districts have worked to ensure that staff meet regularly to focus on how to foster equity and excellence while transitioning their learning delivery models to adapt to the abrupt shift to remote learning.

Q2: What challenges and opportunities exist for schools and school leaders during the pandemic?

In these unprecedented times, educators are facing many challenges, but they also see opportunities to change the disparities that already existed within the education system prior to COVID-19. This section outlines the various challenges and opportunities noted throughout the webinars.

Challenges

It is difficult to provide perspectives to help educators and community members acknowledge that the institution of schools has been built on White fragility and middle-class politeness. Oftentimes, leaders, such as superintendents, are hesitant to pursue these issues because they are on one- or two-year contracts and may not have built the political or social capital needed to make change. In addition, leaders of color are more often perceived as pushing their personal interests when advocating for students of color, whereas White leaders tend to be viewed as altruistic. However, White leaders are less likely to understand the unique positions of people of color and the systems that disproportionately affect them in negative ways (Dixon, Griffin, & Teoh, 2019). Additionally, there are practical issues such as mobility, families being evicted due to a lack of affordable housing, and access to healthcare. A strong correlation exists between areas of poverty and areas

impacted by COVID-19. Children are experiencing trauma, particularly those who were already susceptible to adverse childhood experiences. Panelists raised the concern that children may be in home situations where they are faced with abuse, food security issues, or general safety.

Students' mental health is of great concern to educators. When students are not in school, educators do not have control over students receiving the services they need. For example, students may be experiencing emotional distress from a lack of human contact or the death of family members, but there are no mental health supports available to them. Educators have long been aware of the "summer slide" (i.e., summer learning loss), but they are now faced with the potential of "coronavirus slide" that will need to be addressed come fall. Research projects that, relative to the typical school year, students will return in the fall of 2020 having lost approximately 63-68 percent of learning gains in reading and 37-50 percent in math due to COVID-19 school closures (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). In the worst of projections, the study shows that 6th grade math students may enter the 2020-21 academic year testing at a 5th grade level (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Although students may be promoted to the next grade level, many missed almost a quarter of the previous school year, and this deficiency has the potential for long-term impact. Five years after Hurricane Katrina displaced students from school, about one-third of students were still one year behind academically (Redlener, DeRosa, & Parisi, 2010). It will fall to the teachers and leaders to determine how best to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learning.

Many school districts have had long-standing concerns over budgets and funding, which are now compounded by the pandemic. More funds are being allocated toward school-based safety measures so that students and educators can safely return to the classroom. According to a report compiled by the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) and the School Superintendent Association (AASA), it will cost an average of \$1,778,139 in additional expenses per school district

to cover safety measures such as hand sanitizer and disposable masks (2020). Just hiring additional custodial staff for proper sanitation will cost districts nearly \$450,000 (ASBO & AASA, 2020). Notably, expenses for larger school districts could far exceed these estimates given that the average school district is comprised of about 3,700 students across eight buildings with 329 staff members (ASBO & AASA, 2020). Just for comparison to a large district, Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) serves 445,000 students across 330 schools, charter schools, centers, and colleges (BCPS, 2020). Thus, expenses could exceed \$200 million for this single district using student count as a comparison (120x more students than the average district). Educators are concerned about district and school budget cuts and restrictions, exacerbating worry about how recovery (e.g., of school operations and activities) will occur. The lack of federal resources was a concern raised in many of the webinars, especially when compared to the financial resources schools received during the 2008 recession.

During the 2009-10 school year in New York, federal aid provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) supplemented district budgets by four percent (\$5.6 billion) to offset state and local funding losses (Chakrabarti & Setren, 2015). State funding was negatively affected by unemployment rates that nearly doubled between 2006 and 2010, which led to decreased income tax revenue and an eight percent drop in state revenue overall (Chakrabarti & Setren, 2015). Local funding was mostly affected by the housing market crash which devalued properties by nearly 30 percent across the United States. In New York, property taxes fund 90 percent of the local revenue (Chakrabarti & Setren, 2015). Currently, educators are anticipating receiving only a fraction of what they received during the recession. Considering the challenges they faced in 2008 despite federal aid, moving forward now without similar financial support is a daunting task for many leaders.

Opportunities

Although this is a challenging time, educators understand that there are many opportunities to create change,

“We need to focus engaging students beyond the normal when we return. We should be differentiating for students because that is the focus of equity – providing what students need and realizing that each student is different.”

Webinar Participant

and they are thinking about how best to innovate schools. Furthermore, educators can focus on building relationships with students to help them aspire to a positive, productive future. A theme throughout the webinars was one of hope. The mission of hope should include advocacy, action, and empathy because educators need to understand students’ fears and concerns in order to create hope within this new reality.

Despite the challenges, educators and school systems perceive an opportunity to level the playing field by channeling resources to where they are most needed and changing schooling itself. Panelists suggested that schools may consider creating an anti-marginalization curriculum. Instead of using non-inclusive history books as fact, educators can critique them. Educators also have the opportunity to ensure that curriculum is culturally responsive and relevant to our students’ lives. Panelists agree that integration of SEL curriculum would benefit students so educators can provide space for validation and healing.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to change Board of Education policies such as attendance policies, discipline policies, grading practices, and hiring practices. By analyzing these policies and examining relevant data (e.g., How are vulnerable students most affected by these policies? Are students of color overrepresented when looking at discipline data?), schools can begin to create systems that are equitable to all students. Relatedly, developing, maintaining, and adapting state-wide school calendars for the purpose of providing a central location to reference current (up-to-date) logistical information may be useful for supporting operations. Inspired educators may use this time to be innovative and to redesign schools. Redesigns can ensure that every single student is heard, seen, and respected at school. Now, with the opportunity for remote learning, students no longer need to be forced into a one-size-fits-all school context. Educators may also use this time to listen to student and family needs. Students have the opportunity and autonomy for active voice and choice in what they learn.

To be successful, strong, courageous leadership must exist at all levels. District leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that highly effective principals lead all schools. Principals who set high expectations for staff and students can provide high levels of support, focused on foundational values and driven by what must be accomplished in their schools to ensure that every student receives an equitable education. Alongside this comes the opportunity to utilize a distributive leadership model to share responsibilities and accountability across the educational system.

COVID-19 brought the digital divide to light, especially for the most vulnerable populations, including ELLs, low-income students, and students of color. Flexible learning environments and diverse resources afforded by a shift to digital learning provide an opportunity to better serve these previously disenfranchised populations, especially those who were not thriving during the traditional school day.

Q3: How are school leaders planning for new allocations of staff, time and resources?

The need for support services for students is being emphasized throughout districts as they figure out ways to fund mental health support and better utilize counselors and psychologists. District leaders also mentioned that they needed to deal with transportation, class sizes, and food dissemination.

Hiring and retention practices are under examination. Leaders conveyed the need to push high standards in relation to academic preparation, inclusion, equity, and cultural competence, and to hold those not meeting the standards more accountable. Additionally, some districts are actively recruiting a diverse teaching force that reflects the student body. Having people in leadership positions that look like the students they serve or who have similar cultural backgrounds can help students envision themselves in similar roles and aspire toward them.

Reviewing and revising policies is another way that school leaders are addressing equity issues within their districts. Some districts have established offices of equity to address these issues directly. These offices are reviewing Board of Education policies to ensure they are free of oppressive language and work to establish anti-marginalization. Leaders warned, however, that these offices need to have accountability and some authority to make change. They cannot be offices in name only; they need to be offices that can take action.

Examining the school calendar and allowing opportunities for professional development focused on virtual learning are other strategies that school leaders are considering. They are designing calendars that provide staff time for planning, including instructional time (whether in person or remote). They also understand that learning is not dependent on school buildings and traditional classroom settings, so many districts are exploring opportunities to increase remote learning opportunities.

Q4: How are school and school districts assessing the needs of students and families?

During the pandemic, districts found that they needed to communicate using a variety of means with both students and families, so districts created opportunities to partner with the broader community to understand how to build stronger relationships that support students. Throughout the webinars, the panelists suggested educators lean on counselors and psychologists to connect with families and children, especially those families who have not been in contact with their students' schools over the past several months.

Often, educators are held accountable for contacting their students regularly to check in on them and explore their and their families' needs. For some, this contact may be once a week; for others, it may be more frequent. Panelists deem it a priority to build and maintain relationships with students and ensure they have a network of support around them to address basic needs, such as mental health and food.

Another strategy that some districts are attempting is to establish student equity councils and/or task forces to better understand inequities and to gain feedback from students on how they might be better supported. Educators need to establish a clear understanding of students' fears and concerns, create environments where all students belong and feel safe, and, to the extent possible, ensure that students are part of the larger school or district conversations so they know that their voices are valued.

Q5: What are the budget implications of the closures on states, districts, and schools?

Districts are facing significant budget cuts, but leaders conveyed that their focus remains firmly on students. Panelists stressed that budgets must be strategic in their ability to support the most vulnerable students while remembering that equity does not necessarily mean equal funding. To achieve their goals, such as a 100 percent graduation rate for all students, more funding may need to be allocated to leveling the playing field for underserved student populations. Educators have a moral obligation to tailor the budget to meet the students' needs.

Many panelists commented that they are working with local policy makers to enact equitable funding. Examples ranged from ensuring more equitable per-pupil funding to ensuring that students with diverse needs (e.g., Special Education, ELLs) have the resources they need. Leaders are examining ways in which race, poverty, and funding interconnect to create the most equitable systems for their students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The ten *Equity Talks* webinars produced a rich dialogue on how to develop a more equitable education system. Panelists and participants acknowledged that more conversations are needed; the education system needs to adjust and adapt. They recognized that the pandemic did not create these issues, but it certainly brought disparities to the forefront. The “new normal” must look much different than the “old normal” which did not work for a large portion of the students and their families. As part of these continuing conversations, educators from all levels—district and building—want to learn more about how districts have successfully implemented strategies that are making a difference for students.

Participant Feedback

Surveys revealed that participants found *Equity Talks* to be both valuable and motivational. Many participants commented on their desire for *Equity Talks* to continue, acknowledging that they still have a lot to learn. They noted that, while the types of conversations generated in the webinars are vital, they are also in need of specific strategies and concrete recommendations for making equity a reality in their districts and schools. They conveyed a desire to learn more about what other school districts are doing to achieve these goals as well as to make connections with other educators with similar priorities outside of the webinar format (see “Recommendations” below).

Question-specific Takeaways

Webinars were analyzed in the context of five key questions. Prominent takeaways in relation to each of the questions are presented below.

1) How are school leaders cultivating equity and excellence in the wake of nationwide school closures, especially for the most vulnerable students?

- Strong leadership, courageous conversations, and innovative redesigns to schools and districts are critical to make substantial, lasting change.

School leaders need to think about designing schools in ways that that incorporate more virtual learning and flexibility for students and families.

Educators should consider new ways to personalize education so students are not only learning academics but also being supported in their SEL needs.

- *Equity Talks* allowed educators to have conversations that emphasized the need for action and the need to actively choose to fight against systems of oppression that create inequities for students. “Courageous leaders” will choose to use this time to reflect and disrupt the current educational system to create a new system that provides opportunities for all students.
- The series showed examples of how school districts had stepped up during the pandemic to ensure that all students had access to devices, such as computers or tablets, and internet connectivity. In some cases, districts created hotspots for students who did not have Wi-Fi connections.
- Educators also were reminded how important relationships are with students, even when (perhaps especially when) teaching virtually, which underscored the importance of continuing SEL and trauma-informed support services and programs.

2) What challenges and opportunities exist for schools and school leaders during the pandemic?

- Although there are many challenges facing educators, the recent school closures also alerted people to many opportunities to redesign schools and provide more flexible options to students and their families, including increasing remote or virtual opportunities and making adjustments to the school calendar.
- Educators also discussed the delivery of professional development during the *Equity Talks*. Professional development can be delivered virtually, and given the emphasis on virtual or remote learning, more time needs to be dedicated to

“Now is the time to reimagine our educational system as we know it. We have the opportunity to change everything about our educational systems at this point. We must refuse to go back to the broken system as we knew it.”

Webinar Participant

providing teachers with opportunities to learn how to effectively teach and engage students while interacting with them in online settings.

- Statistics show that the majority of the teaching force is White, which is not reflective of the student population. Districts have undertaken initiatives to recruit and retain more teachers of color to further diversify the teaching force.
- As issues of inequities and racial inequality have risen to the forefront of society, many school districts have intentionally begun or continue to review their Board of Education policies to ensure that they are written and executed through an equity lens. Some districts have actively engaged students in this process by allowing them to participate in discussions, draft policies, and in some cases, have voting power.

3) How are school leaders planning for new allocations of staff, time, and resources?

- Although budgets will be cut, educators made clear that funding for SEL and trauma-informed education must be sustained.

4) How are schools and school districts assessing the needs of students and families?

- Panelists stressed the importance of using multiple means of communication to build and maintain relationships with students and families and ensure they have a network of support around them to address their physical, academic, and/or socio-emotional needs.
- Panelists also suggested that educators rely on counselors and psychologists to connect with students and families who may be struggling.
- Some districts are establishing equity councils to engage with students to ensure not only that their needs are met, but also that their voices influence future decision making.

5) What are the budget implications of the closures on states, districts, and schools?

- Leaders are examining ways in which race, poverty, and funding intersect to create the most equitable education systems for their students.
- Panelists explained that promoting equity for students does not necessarily mean equal funding. It is important to be strategic with budgets to ensure that the student populations most in need are allocated enough funding to place them on track with their peers.

Recommendations

The *Equity Talks* series resulted in several suggestions on how the work on equity throughout the educational system should continue to improve educational opportunities for all students, especially those who have been disenfranchised in the past.

- Provide opportunities for educators to learn more about CRP, SEL, and trauma-informed teaching and for fostering leadership effectiveness. Research shows that CRP, SEL, and trauma-informed teaching are important to create school environments that work for all students. Giving teachers opportunities through professional development and providing resources can strengthen their instructional practice and relationship-building skills for all students. Research also shows that strong leadership is needed to achieve positive student outcomes. Learning opportunities for principals and superintendents should be ongoing as they provide support to staff and students and engage in their communities to ensure that the education being provided meets the needs of all stakeholders.
- Establish Networked Improvement Communities (NIC). Webinar participants expressed a need to continue these types of conversations. One way in which Discovery Education may want to continue this work is through the establishment of NICs, which can be used to address complex educational problems by creating

five domains: (1) understanding the problem, (2) learning the method, (3) building the infrastructure, (4) sustaining the work, and (5) crafting the narrative (McKay, 2017). Although NICs may take time to build, they can be valuable opportunities for educators to explore problems of practice, share challenges, and create solutions together.

- Consider creating Offices of Equity within local school districts and/or Intermediate School districts. Systems across the country are establishing offices dedicated to creating and enforcing equity throughout the district. To be effective, these offices should be held accountable and also hold some authority so they can make decisions that affect the district. Districts should collect data and document the impact that these offices are having on their districts so other districts can learn from their experiences.
- Develop initiatives to recruit and retain educators of color. Recent statistics show that approximately 80 percent of the educator workforce is White, which no longer reflects the student population. Districts should create initiatives to recruit teachers of color. This may involve collaborating with local colleges and universities and providing information to interested students still in high school about education career pathways. Districts may consider recruiting career-changers or adults who have degrees or experience in other fields but are considering transitioning to teaching. Once districts have recruited teachers, they also need to develop ways to retain them, such as providing professional development, creating fair and equitable salary schedules, and treating them with professionalism.
- Share the stories of successful districts as evidence-based by data and experience from the stakeholders. The *Equity Talks* webinars started deep conversations about equity in schools. Many participants requested more information on actionable strategies they could implement within their districts. To demonstrate what is actually working in districts, data will be needed to show effectiveness, and the implementation process used in districts will need to be documented so other districts can use these success stories as models. One way to document this process and show effectiveness may be through case studies, where a few districts can be studied in detail. Districts may want to consider partnering with an external organization to conduct a developmental evaluation, where data are collected and analyzed in real time so modifications can be made immediately. This continuous cycle of improvement allows for refinements and adjustments on an as-needed basis.

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