



## Let's Talk About Race

**Principals must examine their own privilege to conquer unconscious bias and ensure equity for students of color**

BY NEILL ALLEVA

**F**rom education to housing to wealth to health, systemic policies have prevented—and continue to prevent—people of color from accessing opportunities afforded to those lucky enough to be born white. Children are impacted negatively by racial bias every day in schools and society, and the time has come for educational leaders to address the impact of racial bias on their students.

One part of the problem is the cultural mismatch that occurs when schools are populated with minority students and led by white educators. In these settings, school leaders must undertake a personal and professional journey to ensure that they can create an environment in which every student can thrive.

Minor modifications to the curriculum, new SEL programs, and deeper ties to families aren't enough. School leaders must be willing to take action to disrupt biased, oppressive systems and mindsets that have failed for generations. They owe it to their communities to actively engage in a process that doesn't avoid or ignore racial equality, but fosters it.

The active disruption begins with white principals understanding their complicity in serving the privileged and oppressing the marginalized. Most leadership programs fail to present organizational theory alongside antiracist, abolitionist, anti-colonialist, and culturally responsive leadership practices, so this is likely to be a very personal undertaking.

Equipped with the passion and knowledge to validate those who have been marginalized due to race and class and advocate for them, principals can begin the journey by questioning their own personal assumptions. These assumptions might be replete with racial and cultural biases and misunderstandings, especially if the principals are among the people granted privilege by the color of their skin.

### **Taking the First Steps**

One of the first practical steps on this journey is to engage in a multi-dimensional assessment of one's own identity and its relationship to power and privilege. Think about your identity—how you define yourself. Come up with words that others might use to describe your identity. What would they say are its salient features?

Engaging in this exercise sets the conditions for leaders to examine their assumptions about the impact of privilege. I have personally performed the exercise on multiple occasions, and each time, I learn something new about myself.

In a recent faculty meeting, I asked teachers to engage in the same process, but not before I conveyed the different characteristics of my identity. After stating the obvious (white, male, father, principal), I dived deeper into how others might perceive me: oppressor, part of the problem, having access to power and resources. One part of my identity connects to the fact that I can have a bad day or fail at a task, and it won't be blamed on my being white.

Other examples of my own privilege include the fact that if I get pulled over by the police, I don't automatically fear for my life or question whether the stop was due to my skin color. Without exposing and discussing

such factors with staff openly, racial inequities and systemic oppression will continue. As vulnerable as it made me feel, my message is clear: We can—and will—talk about race, power, and privilege.

### Starting the Discussion

Tracey Benson and Sarah Fiarman, former principals turned scholars, recently authored *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism*, which offers a framework school leaders can use to expand the discussion about unconscious racial bias with staff. They define unconscious racial bias as learned beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes about a particular race that result in harmful or preferential treatment of members of that race.

There are plenty of how-to books out there, but few prescribe a strategy that packs as much punch. What Benson and Fiarman describe represents a shift in mindset and one's own view of reality—a reality that privileges some (maybe them) and not others. They ask principals to create the conditions necessary for faculty members and administrators to discuss unconscious racial bias and its impact on students of color openly.

Benson and Fiarman admit to making mistakes on their own respective journeys, yet they offer insights for school leaders willing to confront unconscious racial bias. Leaders might not have all the answers, they say, but by using an adaptive approach to exploring race and racism in schools, they can create a culture in which participants can digest truths that have traditionally been perceived as off-limits.

*Unconscious Bias in Schools* contains lots of ideas about ways to confront racial bias, as well as profound anecdotes from those who have. Along the way, the authors provide invaluable insights that emerged as a result of adult learning and leadership. Here are a few of those ideas and core principles:

- Educators often act in ways that are racially biased without realizing it.
- We must give ourselves permission to be learners on a journey and embrace a growth mindset.
- Intentions are important, but not nearly as important as the examination of one's unconscious impact on students of color. In short, white students are favored.
- Schools must be able to normalize discussions around race and bias.
- The binary labeling of oneself and others as “racist” or “nonracist” must be dismantled.
- The notion of “colorblind” must be dismantled and replaced with a more nuanced view of race.
- We must examine disciplinary practices and policies that target students of color unfairly.
- We must review school policies and practices to ensure that student identities are affirmed in the curriculum, the classroom environment, and the books on the shelves.

Transformational learning governed by adaptive leadership is the recipe for change, Fiarman and Benson conclude. And with this philosophy acting as the engine for a developmental approach to confronting unconscious bias, school leaders can blaze a path forward courageously. ●

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### Learn More About Unconscious Bias

To provide high-quality, relevant resources and support to principals on issues related to racial equity and dismantling systemic racism in school communities, NAESP has partnered with Project Implicit® to provide a customized Implicit Association Test for NAESP members.

The assessment focuses on helping you identify race biases. The results will allow you to reflect on your practice as a principal, identify gaps, and advance your approach to culturally responsive teaching and learning.

Take the assessment at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/Study?tid=-1>.