A Culture of Equity

Principals don’t control systemic issues that contribute to the nation’s student achievement gap, such as inequities in school funding or the growing number of homeless students. But they do, however, have a major impact on a leading equalizer to these inequities: school culture.

School culture is at the heart of many of the various strategies educators offer to break the cycle of our nation’s persisting achievement gap. The culture must first and foremost affirm students and their ability to achieve—belying implied assumptions about their capacities based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, or even their past achievements.

Take for example principal Vanessa Stuart’s case study, “Inspire Growth,” which recommends transforming school culture to focus on grit and growth mindset, as well as encourages educators to reexamine their own perceptions about poverty and the assumptions about the students they serve. This thread of educator self-reflection also weaves through “Breakthrough on Discipline,” where professor Edward Fergus outlines the current gaps in discipline policies that result in disproportionate suspensions and disciplinary actions, and recommends strategies for more equitable approaches.

Closing out the special focus on the achievement gap are leadership team Deyrle Wallace and Vincent Potts’ description of their school’s approach to curbing summer slide by extending the school year, and education strategist Searetha Smith-Collins’ case for strong parent engagement, especially for our youngest learners. All of these ideas depend on principals viewing their leadership role with the “guardian of equity” lens that New York University professor Pedro Noguera advocates for in the opening article. According to Noguera, “capacity-building is ongoing work. It’s not something you do once.” Noguera adds that culture is “the kind of thing that great leaders are attentive to because without that kind of attention, too often kids don’t get the kind of learning opportunities that they need.”

Despite the various deleterious circumstances that serve to disadvantage students, schools are still called to address the needs of each child. Principals must lead learning communities to address students’ needs, preparing them for college, careers, and bright futures. How does your school and leadership measure up to these challenges? I hope that this issue of Principal gives you the necessary tools, resources, and inspiration to cultivate a culture of equity that supports success for all students.

—Kaylen Tucker, Ph.D.