Schools are increasingly asked to expand their role in meeting the needs of all students. They are asked to provide a blend of synergistic ideas that are both traditional and progressive while dealing with huge differences in skill levels (Pogrow, 2006). The response of K-8 principals to this challenge can make all the difference in the world to children being raised in a world that is increasingly diverse.

As the National Association of Elementary School Principals recognizes the role of school leaders in closing the learning gap, it becomes critical to examine how that role is changing in regard to equity.

Preparing for the future means knowing how to effectively teach diverse populations.
Policy and politics are not, nor have they ever been, the sole driving force behind educational progress for minority students. It takes individual teachers and administrators working actively and tirelessly on behalf of students to make a difference. As Singleton and Linton (2006) note, educators must have a passion for addressing equity and a willingness to change. When school leaders begin to purposefully and thoughtfully address the needs of all students, they invest in their community. That investment pays dividends that can be measured by both qualitative and quantitative means.

The importance and value of building relationships is recognized as a critical factor in the success of minority students. Educators readily agree that we are charged with establishing and fostering sustainable relationships with children before we can even hope to help them (Blankstein, 2004). Kuykendall (2004) calls this “people-oriented learning.” School leaders who hope to reach students from diverse backgrounds must value their need to be educated via effective pedagogy. Children from minority communities have the infinite capacity to become lifelong learners if they can connect with at least one caring person who is willing to serve as a positive role model (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007).

“It takes individual teachers and administrators working actively and tirelessly on behalf of students to make a difference.”

It is the responsibility of K-8 principals to create model programs at the elementary and middle levels that promote and ensure an equitable education for all. Politicians and school districts should support these initiatives, but schools need not wait for funding to move forward. School leaders who accept their responsibility in the fight for equity will work until each student reaches his or her potential.

Two themes emerge from educational research that may provide a focus for K-8 school leaders seeking to ensure equity. First, specific leadership qualities enhance and magnify the relationship between school leaders and student performance. Second, colleges and universities are reflecting on leadership training and their role in ensuring equal access to education.
Leadership Qualities

While the role of the teacher in ensuring equity is undeniable, that mission can be challenging if school leaders, through action or inaction, undermine the efforts of teachers. Therefore, it is critical for school leaders to possess qualities, and exhibit behaviors, that are consistent with the goals of equal access. Leadership must ensure that schools are places where children interact socially, engage in recreation, and learn to be compassionate (Grogan, 2004). In order for school leaders to understand their role in promoting equity, they must examine their own sociopolitical identities within the context of their profession (Evans, 2007). It may also help if they appreciate the meaning of social justice within the educational context. Social justice is a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy. It is focused on reducing the marginalization and exclusion of groups. For Theoharis (2007), social justice leadership means that principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized conditions central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision.

School leaders must grasp the complex role of race and demographic change in their schools. Evans (2007) uses the term “sensemaking” when discussing this concept. She defines sensemaking as “the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals.” Evans also notes that school leaders must interpret meaning for themselves before they can shape and influence events in their schools. This is a complex and crucial skill for school leaders motivated by equity issues. Evans advises that if school leaders are to address the needs of a racially diverse student population, they must acknowledge their own dominance and marginalization of others.

Effective school leadership for equity requires principals to be reflective of their own personal racial identity. They must constantly ask themselves how their personal race biases may be impacting the decision-making process. For school leaders to be effective in meeting the needs of minority students, they must consider themselves advocates for all students. Theoharis (2007) reminds us that social justice leadership is what good leadership should be. Henze (2005) also reminds us that leaders must improve their understanding and knowledge by constantly wearing their “equity lens,” which will enhance their ability to promote equity as a consistent practice.

Leadership Training

Recognizing that effective school leadership is at the core of equity in education, the question becomes how do we provide training for administrators? Administrators need more than a cognitive understanding of their settings, they need an emotional understanding (Grogan, 2004). Henze (2005) suggests that professional development for school leaders should address their awareness of how discourse creates and reinforces ideologies. Henze identifies the discourse of educational leaders as a focus for improving equitable access to education. She notes that educational leaders often talk about race and equity, but suggests that we need to know how they understand these concepts. She found that the discourse of educational leaders is a neglected topic in professional preparation courses. She suggests that educational leadership programs could encourage new leaders to use language more consciously.

There is increasing support for leadership training programs that produce administrators who will ensure equitable results for all students (Lopez, Magdaleno, & Mendoza Reis, 2006; Henze, 2005; Theoharis, 2007; Grogan, 2004). As the K-8 student population becomes increasingly diverse, a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer appropriate (Lopez et al., 2006; Kose, 2007). The preparation of school leaders thus becomes central in the pursuit of equity. The responsibility, in many respects, rests with professors of educational administration who must assume responsibility for leadership programs that promote equitable results for all students (Lopez et al., 2006). Grogan (2004) also suggests that we create professional development that focuses on ways for administrators to counter the negative effects of national school reform efforts. She offers that school leaders should collaborate with teachers to provide a rich curriculum. Grogan implores superintendents and principals to ensure that the remediation efforts mandated by school reform laws do not become punitive for students. Evans (2007) summarizes the concerns related to school leadership by positing the need for school leaders to have a clear and lucid ideology related to the sociopolitical issues. School leaders who have a global awareness might be better able to challenge the status quo structure in schools.

In order for K-8 principals to be the leaders of change that NAESP’s Vision 2021 initiative calls for, they will need to become fluent in issues associated with equity. School districts will need to actively seek out and train administrators who possess the skills and ability to advocate for all of their students. Colleges will be charged with including specific training that provides budding administrators with the skills they will need to eliminate the achievement gap. If the future of K-8 education is now,
then school leaders will need to make conscious decisions directed at ensuring equity for all students.

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