



How APs Impact Equity

Representation, relationships, and hard work are key to leveling the playing field

By Ian P. Murphy



Assistant principals can play a critical role in advancing racial and gender equity in schools, says “The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership,” the research review commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and published last year by Vanderbilt University/Mathematica.

“This research synthesis is essential to our understanding of a role that often is overlooked,” says Jody Spiro, Wallace’s director of education leadership. “We hope this report encourages school districts and policymakers to rethink the position as a lever for improving equity and strengthening principal pipelines in ways that ultimately benefit students.”

Better Representation

As a common stepping stone to the principal’s job, assistant principals can bring diversity to the principalship and other leadership positions. The research review found that 24 percent of assistant principals in six states were people of color—an improvement in representation, but nowhere near the percentages of students of color in some schools.

Bringing greater diversity to school leadership helps students connect with, and learn from, educators who look like them. It’s an “easy fix,” says Farrell C. Thomas, principal of Waterloo Elementary School in Waterloo, South Carolina, and a former AP: Make it the school’s mission to seek out and nurture appropriate candidates and hire a diverse staff. “It has to be deliberate and intentional,” he says.

To encourage diversity among APs, the study recommends that schools and districts:

- Conduct equity audits to identify and eliminate possible barriers to leadership for educators of color and women;
- Develop professional standards for APs, recognizing that the role often leads to the principalship;
- Examine evaluations, mentoring, and professional development to ensure they are suitable for the AP role and equitable for people of color and women; and
- Instruct principals on effectively mentoring the assistant principals under their guidance.

“Examining who is receiving mentoring and being encouraged to pursue leadership roles, and ensuring that assistant principals have equitable experiences while in their roles, could help diversify the principalship and contribute to more equitable outcomes,” says Mariesa Herrmann, senior researcher for Mathematica.

Equity in hiring should extend beyond the AP position, adds David Jaimes, assistant principal at Edwards Elementary School in Newberg, Oregon. “We want to achieve what they call ‘market representation,’” he says. “This means that if we have 50 percent students of color, 50 percent of the staff should be staff of color. We need to represent all of the diverse categories present in our schools—or at least that should be the target.”

An Obligation for Equity

Regardless of their personal backgrounds, APs are increasingly tasked with advancing equity

initiatives in coordination or in concert with the principal. APs have an obligation to offer every student equal opportunities, free of the subtle biases and institutionalized roadblocks that can undermine long-term success.

“Equity is about leveling the playing field for all students and people,” Thomas says. “For educators, it is meeting students where they are to help them become successful and master the content being taught. Discipline, coaching, professional development, classroom observation, and differentiating instruction are [areas] in which APs can help.”

“The assistant principal plays a pivotal role in advancing equity work, because they are on the ground doing the work on a daily basis,” Jaimes says. “Even if the assistant principal is relegated to just doing discipline work, equity should still be at the forefront.”

Disrupting Discipline

Discipline is an area ripe for equity improvements. Statistics reveal that boys and children of color routinely face more frequent and more

severe discipline. It’s likely a factor of who’s heading the class: According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 79 percent of public school teachers were white during the 2017–2018 school year, while more than half of public school students were students of color.

“Boys are constantly in and out of my office,” Jaimes says. “We need to figure out how to deal with [incidents] in an equitable way. Do we need to give them more movement breaks? Are they learning in a way that is engaging for them? How can we implement Universal Design for Learning to give boys choice in how they learn and minimize instances of dysregulation?”

“When I’m doing discipline work, I always have my equity lens on,” he adds. “With the support of the principal, we have been able to implement restorative practices. We are doing community circles and respect agreements. We are increasing social-emotional learning by implementing a new curriculum.”

Addressing disparities in discipline and the biases behind them starts with getting to know the

Tips for the Journey

- Read, understand, and become knowledgeable about cultures and people who don’t look like you, Thomas says. “Live on the premise that ‘all means all,’ and model this belief to others.”
- Establish a diverse pipeline of educators in order to better reflect the needs and experiences of people in the community.
- Build relationships, Thomas says, and don’t be afraid to challenge those who aren’t practicing equity appropriately.
- Be patient, Jaimes says. As Glenn E. Singleton says in *Courageous Conversations About Race*, “You have to expect nonclosure.”
- Be persistent. “Show up every day and rumble,” Jaimes says. “Keep the conversation going, and do not give up.”

students better, Thomas says: “Teachers have to formulate meaningful relationships with their students—particularly students who do not look like them.”

Collaborative Champions

As liaisons across all levels, APs are the foot soldiers of any equity effort. “All of us in education are trying to close the opportunity gap,” Jaimes says. “We know that equity is the bridge that will get us there. The difference is when we actually put theory to practice. It is not about having an equity statement or an equity policy—we must do the work.”

Distance learning afforded Jaimes an opportunity to focus less on discipline and more on big-picture, dual-language equity efforts. “I participated in monthly, districtwide Latino parent meetings,” he says. “I served on the City of Newberg Equity Task Force. I am in charge of an assessment pilot program for our dual-language team. It is important that we all work together.”

“There is strength in numbers,” Thomas agrees. “The more leaders within a building who are championing the call of equity, the greater the likelihood of these efforts being successful within the school and the culture of the school. The assistant principal should and must mirror the vision and mission of the building leader.”

APs can involve themselves in instructional practices, lead restorative talks, observe instructional practices, offer feedback to teachers, and craft equity, he says. The hardest part? Changing the mindsets of people who don’t—or don’t want to—believe that inequities exist. “People who do not experience it often don’t believe that there is a problem,” Thomas says.

“This is the hardest part of equity work: the time needed to get everyone on the same page,” he says. “We should all be advancing the work, but that’s not the reality that we face. We face roadblocks, egos, white fragility, and systemically racist practices that perpetuate systems of oppression. Currently, we are facing a divided nation that has politically charged equity work.”

“We are in a constant struggle,” Thomas adds. “The journey is never-ending. We will always be doing this work. We have to continue to do this work. We have to do this work against all odds. The students need us. This work is too important to give up.” ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Principal magazine.

More Resources for APs



THE SECOND-HALF SPRINT

Even in the best of times, it can be grind for assistant principals to keep students, teachers, and themselves motivated throughout the second half of the year. Add the continually shifting pandemic protocols and ongoing staffing shortages, and enthusiasm and effectiveness may be tough to muster. Readers of the February *APs Rising* e-newsletter learned how some of their colleagues keep their eyes on the whys through the end of the year.

Watch for more insights in the April edition of the *APs Rising* e-newsletter!



This article is brought to you in partnership with The Wallace Foundation. The foundation works to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for children and in the arts for everyone. Research commissioned by and produced by the foundation is available without charge from the Knowledge Center at wallacefoundation.org.