EQUITY

AT A CROSSROADS

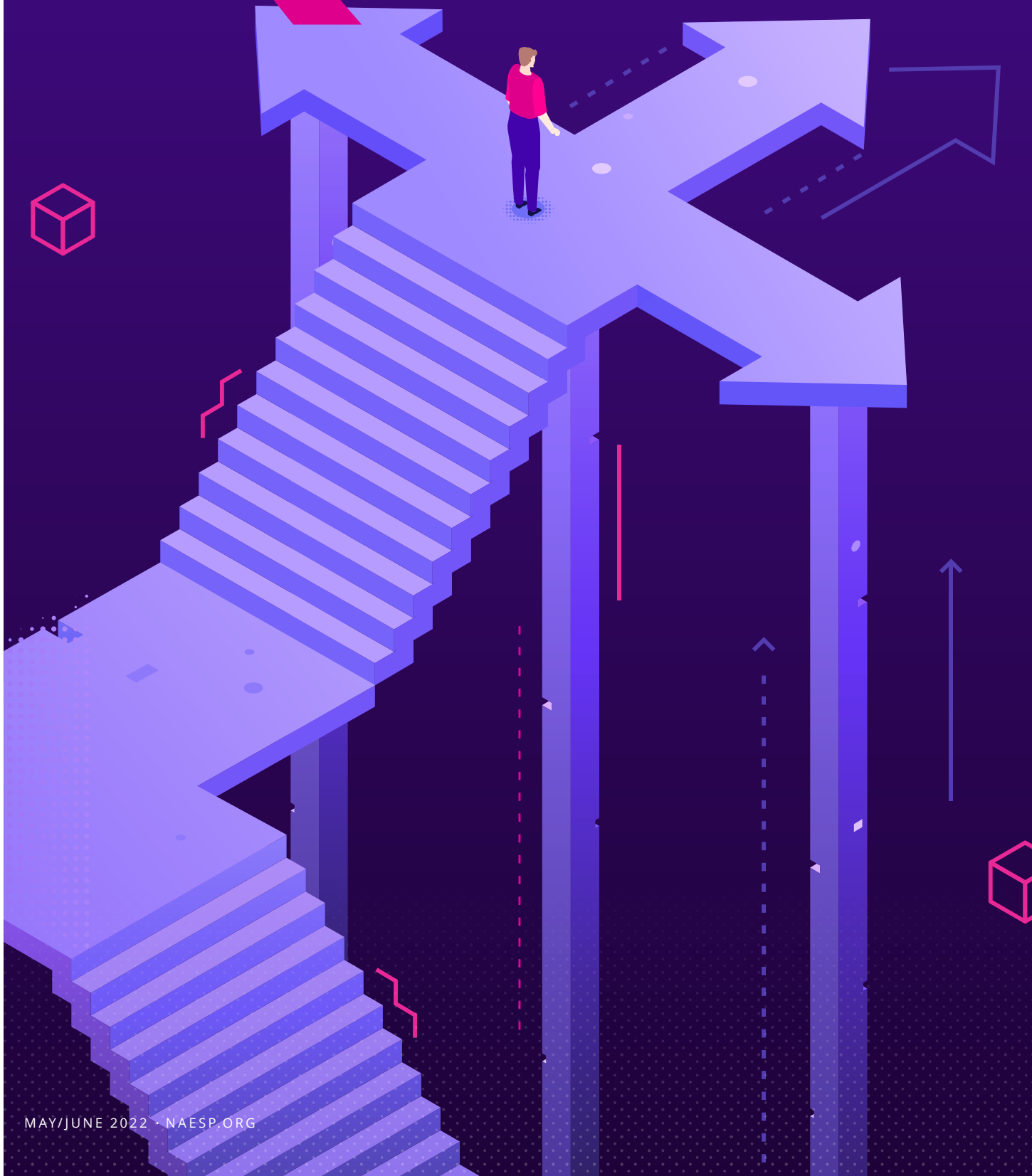**To recalibrate goals in a shifting school environment, look at the systems in place, the choices made, and what doesn't work for individual students**

A Q&A with leadership coach and *We Got This!* author Cornelius Minor

Cornelius Minor is a Brooklyn-based educator who works with teachers and school leaders to support equitable literacy reform in cities worldwide. His book, *We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be,* tells how schools' everyday choices affect equity and academic success.

Listening to kids is an everyday choice that's far more effective for expanding access and opportunity than relying on standardized assessments, he says, and other systems that often carry biases against specific groups of students. *Principal* recently sat down with Minor virtually to ask a few questions about expanding equity even in a pandemic environment.

***Principal*: What kinds of marginalization are at work in elementary schools?**

Minor: A lot of times when people think about marginalization, they mistake marginalization for unkindness: "I'm not mean to Cornelius, so how is it he feels marginalized?" People fail to see the systemic nature of how marginalization works. Systems are policies, traditions, and customs that govern a school to inequitable outcomes. Some of them have been in place for years, and some of them leave out specific groups of kids.

There was a project I was working on where the science department brings people in to talk about their work. This year, they couldn't bring in experts to talk to the kids, so they had the kids watch videos. It sounded like a great solution, but I had to remind them that there are kids in the school with auditory processing disabilities [who would] need other supports.

Having a science grade depend on students' ability to listen to four hours of video was going to be challenging for some—not because they aren't hard workers or aren't putting in an effort, but because they were born with a hearing impairment. When you stay committed to the system, the kids with the disability lose. The same happens with girls, with BIPOC kids, with queer kids, with poor kids—marginalization remains because schools commit to things that do not produce the best learning for specific groups of kids.

Principal: How do standardized assessments reinforce or fail to address biases?

Minor: These tests were not created as instruments to measure kids' learning; these tests were created to sort people. It's important to acknowledge that kids are not standard. To say that the kid who can write a five-paragraph essay to express themselves is more capable than the kid who sketches a diagram or builds a model—that model is flawed. It is really important for kids to understand that bubbling in sheets of paper isn't the only way you can show you're smart.

One thing I'm excited to show kids is the Nobel Prize ceremonies [so they can] see who they can become. I think it was in the physics category that the recipient showed their process by drawing a diagram. I thought that was brilliant—here you have this Nobel Prize winner who expresses their genius by drawing! As I was watching this, I realized that the Nobel Prize winner would have failed science in our school.

Principal: How can you get educators to recognize marginalization for what it is?

Minor: The kids will tell them if they're listening. When the kids tell us, however, the message won't always sound familiar. You might not raise your hand and say, "Mr. Minor, I am feeling intellectually unsafe." That is a complicated declaration for a kid to make. What you might do instead is call your friend a name or throw a paper ball.

One of the ways we make sure that outcomes are going to be kid-centered is to take every opportunity to really hear the kids. And part of listening means understanding that not every method a kid uses to communicate is going to come in a way you're used to understanding.

Rather, I'm going to notice antisocial behavior or kids investing in their friends and not in their coursework. This kid might be trying to tell me that this activity hasn't been constructed in a way that meets their needs as a learner—and that is a message that I should reimagine the experience.

Principal: What "everyday choices" are influential in guaranteeing equitable access for every child?

Minor: I ask myself: What are the specific systems in my school that might marginalize kids? What are the practices that might empower some kids, but harm other kids? I think about what counts as work or participation—what is for a grade, and what isn't? Those are everyday choices.

Take something as simple as what counts as work. How do we find a way to view kids in a strengths-based capacity instead of naming the things they can't do? What does it mean to pass this class—is it based on compliance, or is passing this class based on an actual demonstration of proficiency? Am I teaching with a method that kids will find accessible?

The discipline, the classroom, the activity—all of those things have choices that affect school outcomes. School leaders have to empower people to make those choices, and school leaders have to cultivate the kind of community where people feel they can make those kinds of choices.

Principal: How can educators listen to children better and use that knowledge to guide instruction?

Minor: By creating an opportunity to be heard. Kids will always share if they think what they say is going to matter. Early in the school year, I ask kids' opinions. Let's say one student tells me that he likes to learn by using movement. Tomorrow or a week from now, I offer an opportunity to move. [The student] is sitting in that class, and he says, "He heard me, and now he's doing it." That student is more likely to share going forward. I always want to show kids evidence that something they said made a difference.

Principal: How can instructional leaders encourage the adoption of identity-affirming curricula and materials?

Minor: It's a matter of making the choices. People tend to overthink things: "Oh my god, how am I going to find the materials to support the life experiences of the kid?!" We exist in the 21st century—Google exists. There are libraries full of resources, and so many librarians will support us. A school librarian is the principal's best friend.

So much of early American history is white men. Once, I asked a librarian, "Do you have any resources about what women were doing in early American history?" The librarian said, "Give me four hours." She came back with all of these beautiful books and resources about women in American history.

A lot of school leaders make the mistake of thinking they're in it alone. It would be easy to say, "I need to convene a committee." Instead, walk down the hall and ask the librarian: "Look, I'm hoping that you can help me cultivate curricular experiences that really reflect who the kids are and the cultures they come from."

Principal: What else is involved in designing a culturally sustaining pedagogy?

Minor: Culturally sustainable pedagogy isn't an additional thing we do; it's part of our everyday. I think about a welcoming and affirming environment: What's the experience going to be when children walk in? Who's going to greet them at the front door? What kind of art are they going to see in the hallway?

The second thing is materials, but I think about giving teachers experiences to construct their understanding of those materials. Professional learning is a huge part of a culturally sustaining pedagogy. I also think about how we reach beyond the walls of the school—how we reach parents, and specifically parents who have been marginalized.

Principal: How can principals ensure that staff and parents are on board with an equity initiative?

Minor: Creating an environment where every kid is affirmed is our job. We are at a place right now in American history where some people stand in staunch opposition to creating a school environment where every kid belongs. There are people, there is legislation, that says, "Every kid belongs, *except if you're gay*." Or, "Every kid belongs, *except if you're an immigrant*," or "Every kid belongs, *except if you're Black*."

[That's] anti-human rhetoric, and those people will be upset with principals.

This idea of getting everybody on board, I think, is flawed. I recently took a trip with my daughter to explore some archives. In one photo, there was a group of women all holding signs advocating for the right to vote, and a man is spitting on one of the women. My daughter asked me, "Why is he spitting?" I had to help her understand that these women wanted the right to vote, and this man did not want them to vote.

She asked me, "Why didn't the women wait until everybody was on board?" I had to help her understand that men like this were never going to be on board. Men like this were always going to be in opposition to women voting. If those women were to wait for everyone to be on board, we would still be waiting today.

I think the same rule applies to creating a culturally affirming environment in schools. Everybody will not be on board. There will be people who say, "I don't want you talking about immigration; I don't want you talking about Black people." You have to ignore those people—this is a school where *humans* go. Getting everybody on board is the enemy of progress.

Principal: How can principals advance equity in a rancorous political environment?

Minor: First, I want to remind everyone that the work we do is political. John Dewey is often credited as the father of American education, and [he] took the very Jeffersonian stance that you can't have an operational democracy without public education. If we expect people to vote on the issues of the day, they have to be educated on the issues of the day.

Ever since that moment, public education has been about expanding people's access to a more democratic America. Anybody who argues that education is not political is misinformed—it is created to advance democracy. Anything that attempts to abridge people's access to democracy is the enemy of public education and the enemy of the public educator. To be a school leader now means you have to be ready for opposition.

Principal: How can principals reengage with equity work when they are overwhelmed with pandemic leadership?

Minor: That question assumes that equity work is separate from pandemic relief. If I help people navigate a pandemic, that's equity work. If I am attending to the resources they have access to, that's equity work. Helping ensure all teachers have the energy to teach kids powerfully is pandemic relief—and also equity work.

Core Concepts: Equity

- Traditional school structures such as standardized testing can often marginalize specific subsets of students.
- Understanding that children might communicate in unfamiliar ways, educators must listen to students to construct learning that engages them effectively.
- Leading schools during a pandemic demands flexibility, and many actions designed to support the kids hit hardest can be considered equity work.
- Principals should be ready to face opposition on equity initiatives if they hope to see school progress instead of waiting for everyone to be on board.

If somebody gets hit by a car, you don't help everybody at the scene. You help the person who got hit by the car first. This is how you recover from a tragedy: You ask yourself who has been most profoundly impacted, because they need the biggest investment. When we look across our communities, who are the kids whose families have been most profoundly impacted by COVID-19? Those are the kids who are going to need our best support. That's equity work.

A huge portion of our kids' parents lost jobs during the pandemic. They don't have the same access to books and school supplies as when their parents were employed. We also have kids whose parents work on Wall Street; they didn't lose anything. So when it's time to distribute books and resources, the kids whose parents lost their jobs are going to get more.

Historically, there has been this belief that we move through difficulty: "If we just hold on, this will be over soon." Or, "If I wait long enough, somebody in charge will tell me what to do." Here's the thing about moving through difficulty: It's passive. Moving through difficulty fails to address the present or the reality of the difficulty itself. This moment is about active leadership.

When you face difficulty, some things are going to get left undone, but that doesn't mean you failed. People are still operating under yesterday's methodologies, and I think that's wildly problematic. Solving this moment doesn't mean that things have to go back to how they used to be. Things are not going to look like they used to look.

You have leaders who are willing to pivot flexibly, and you have leaders who are dogmatically committed to yesterday. And I'm finding that the people who are dogmatically committed to yesterday are failing triumphantly, while the people who are willing to be flexible and meet this moment are getting through it in a people-centered way. ●