

## Leadership Tips and Talking Points June 2021

### **Be relentless about promoting a positive vision of education, opportunity, and inclusion in your community. Advocate for your school district's values.**

Be clear about what your school community stands for. Routinely remind your staff, families, and community of your school district's shared values, with a particular emphasis on values like fairness, respect, inclusion, kindness, responsibility, equity, pragmatism, etc.

### **Anticipate pushback and judgment ... and stay on message.**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work is a hotly divided topic right now in the United States. No matter what your district does, there is almost certainly going to be a wide variety of opinion about it. There is no one course of action that is universally supported. Whether your district is doing very little related to DEI or whether your district is actively and assertively changing your system, you will be judged (that's a given) and you could find yourself targeted by national groups who lean on local citizens to promote their agendas.

For this reason, it is important to be clear about what actions your district is taking and why. **Be especially confident in your ability to articulate "the why."** Having clarity about the student needs that are guiding your decisions and actions will give you strength to stay on message when you are feeling targeted and stressed.

### **Do not get dragged into a politicized debate about national ideas. Stay laser-focused on your students, their needs, and your local actions.**

Respond as appropriate to critics, but reserve most of your energy for doing the good work of educating your community's children. Stay focused on your district's priorities and on supporting and leading the team that gets this important work done. Do not let extremists distract you from your purpose.

Here are a few things you can say to redirect a conversation away from a debate of national ideas and toward a conversation that can be more productive:

- *"Rather than getting caught up in the national debate, let's talk about what's actually happening here in our community ..."*
- Or, *"Some people are using terminology like 'critical race theory' in ways that are confusing, but our commitments here in ABC community are pretty simple: ..."*
- Then highlight equity-related aspects of your strategic plan or district mission and values, for example: serving all students, ensuring all students are treated fairly, empowering all students to succeed, working to close achievement gaps across the system, making sure our schools are safe and inviting places for all children to learn, etc.

### **Reframe the issue in your own words.**

Don't waste your time trying to explain terms that have become politicized. There is no benefit in arguing about whether a particular word, phrase, or acronym like DEI or "critical race theory" (CRT) is being used correctly. While you might feel more confident in these discussions if you deepen your understanding of what CRT is and isn't, you don't need to be an expert in current buzz words in order to talk confidently about how your district is working to advance equity. Use terms that are familiar to your community. In fact, in most cases it is best to keep using the terms you have already been using to describe the work you are already doing.

### **Educate yourself about the experiences of people who are different from you.**

Every community has diversity. Your school district undoubtedly serves people who are very different from yourself. One of your jobs as a leader is to understand the needs of the people you were hired or elected to serve. Let your students, their experiences and their outcomes be your biggest teacher. Take the time to educate yourself, particularly about the cultures and histories of those who feel most different to you. You might not like or agree with everything you learn, but you will be better able to understand where others are coming from, which will make you a better leader.

### **Bring the same skills to bear with your critics that you bring to equity work.**

Resist the sometimes very tempting urge to lump your critics together and dismiss their concerns wholesale. DEI work asks us to look at each of our students as individuals and seek to meet their specific needs while also considering what unfair systemic barriers they might be facing and how we can break those down. Bring the EXACT same skills to bear as you consider how best to approach or respond to local critics. Treat them as individuals. Look beyond talking points that they might have copied off the internet and seek to understand the personal concerns and emotions that are driving them to think and behave as they are. Meet them where they are, respectfully. Listen deeply. Let them know you have listened. Look hard for common ground, even if it is small. Emphasize that.

This is a strong approach for leading any kind of conflict resolution. It is disarming to be received with respect and active listening when expecting defensiveness and argument. That doesn't mean that this approach will work with people who are determined to be disruptors, but it can be remarkably healing and productive when dealing with those who are on the fringe of an extremist viewpoint and swayed back to moderate ground.

While it is important that you act in an open, respectful, inclusive way with your critics, do not placate bigotry or racism. When faced with perspectives or demands that are bigoted, be prepared to calmly, respectfully, and firmly reiterate your personal and organizational commitment to equity and the celebration of all members of your educational community.

### **Have strong procedures in place for public meetings.**

Some people genuinely are not interested in conflict resolution or common ground, but are instead determined to be disruptive. When faced with disruptive activists, you will need to lean on strong and consistent procedures (for example, agendas with specific times and formats for public input), clear expectations for behavior in meetings, as well as the personal strength and leadership confidence to enforce the rules fairly and consistently.

Be very cautious about creating opportunities for individuals to “take over” meetings while emotions are high. Focus on small group dialogue. Seek input in writing rather than using a report-out approach. Be able to turn off microphones if needed to enforce time limits.

Plan ahead for the possibility of escalating political action and changing forms of demonstration and advocacy. If you haven’t already, talk with local law enforcement leaders about how to work together if needed to ensure the safety of public meetings or address potential harassment.

### **Accept that this issue brings out big emotions.**

One of the skills we must strengthen is the ability to hear people who are emotionally charged without becoming dismissive, defensive, or emotionally charged ourselves. It is not ok to dismiss the content of constituents’ concerns simply because they might be expressed in a way that is uncomfortable for us. So, while it is important to have strong procedures in place to ensure public meetings remain safe and productive during times of high emotions, it is also important to give your community outlets to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them.

### **When positive engagement fails, consider aspects of the “grey rock” approach.**

When dealing with people who are manipulative, dramatic, or abusive, there is an approach called being a grey rock. With apologies to geologists, the idea is to become as uninteresting as a grey rock so that the bad behavior becomes less fun. Advocates of the grey rock approach note three important elements:

- be as brief as possible when dealing with abusive people;
- be scrupulously factual; and
- avoid emotional engagement (don’t let yourself get hooked!).

As a school leader, you can borrow elements of this strategy. You are not obligated to create fresh responses to repetitive messages, for example. There are times to stop the ongoing conversation, especially when the other party is determined to misunderstand and manipulate. In those cases, refer back to previous conversations, decisions, and responses. Point out the many opportunities to provide feedback into the district’s direction. Then, focus on the good work ahead of you and give the drama only as much of your attention as is absolutely necessary.

## **Be honest and emotionally neutral in your assessment and description of your community's current reality.**

Acknowledge any division that exists, but don't "admire it." Also, resist the urge to minimize differences (it is disingenuous and harms trust). Use emotionally neutral words and phrases.

- *"This is an area where our community has differences of perspective ..."*
- *"We acknowledge that there is a wide variety of opinions on this issue ..."*

## **Know that, in some cases, the most vocal activists are getting their lists of concerns and ideas for action from national or even international movements.**

Leaders of a number of current political movements have created strategies to make their national agendas feel local. They advocate ways to target school leaders so that you will feel pressure at work, at home, and in the community. They might target school board members' places of business or engage in other forms of advocacy and social pressure. They will make their messaging feel very personal, even when they are following a playbook step-by-step. Do not let yourself get distracted from the good work you are doing.

## **Increase the amount of time set aside for dialogue and facilitated reflection.**

It is much harder to stereotype, demonize, and dismiss each other if we truly know each other. Supporting strong relationships that cross typical demographic or political lines within your educational community is one way to help inoculate your district against extremists. Create opportunities throughout your system for tabletop or small group dialogue with thoughtful prompts. This work is not linear and it is dialogue-heavy. It can also feel isolating, especially if your community is heavily divided. Set aside time for people to connect in meaningful ways. Invest in relationships.

## **Do not try to do this work alone.**

Create a leadership team that can be co-learners, thought partners, and key connectors in the work. Start with your existing leadership team and build your collective capacity to understand and talk about bias, to look for patterns in your student outcomes data, and to listen deeply to those with whom we disagree. Remember to include students and family members in this early work. Build out from there. This alone will bring immediate benefits to schools and families.

At the same time, embrace the idea that this is community work, not just a school district initiative. In addition to building capacity within your internal circles of leadership and influence, invite organizations like the food bank, child care providers, community coalitions, etc. into the conversation. Such a leadership group lends breadth and strength to the work.

Also remember that you are not alone as a leader. Remember to connect with others you trust. Talk about your experiences, share your concerns, seek support and guidance. WASA, WSSDA, WSPRA, and other professional associations have resources and connections that can help you navigate the complexities of these times.

**Finally, remember that good self-care is a leadership decision.**

Leaders who take care of their personal needs for rest, activity, social support, and good nutrition are able to make better decisions under pressure than people who are depleted, stagnated, exhausted, or hungry. Take extra good care of yourself when stress levels are highest (especially in advance of big public meetings and times of anticipated conflict) and expect the rest of your district's leadership team to do the same.