

# THE WORK OF EQUITY: It Starts with the Principal

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## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction, Closing the Gap*

**D**iscussing equity is not an easy thing to do unless you are in a group of like-minded people. That could be a group that is racially and ethnically diverse or not — but still thinks alike.

Group think is easy. Most often, a group just reinforces its thinking as it creates a group narrative. The problem is unique and distinct individual narratives help us understand the need to reexamine ourselves and get lost in the group's passion for the idea of equity, rather than the analysis of the topic and more importantly, ourselves. If we do not start with ourselves, then the analysis and solution will inevitably start with them. So all of us are absolved, and the problem is with them. Once that happens, all rational dialogue stops and feelings take over them — guilt, shame, anger which begets denial, defensiveness, wariness, and maybe the worst of all, avoidance.

Equity takes a backseat again, and the status quo remains.

### A HOPEFUL APPROACH TO EQUITY

When I saw our AWSP group, Mastering of Principal Leadership



Dr. Caprice Hollins leads professional learning on issues of race and equity at MPLN.

Network (MPLN), was going to take on the topic of equity, I was very leery of the process and outcomes. The first presentation and resulting discussions did not calm my trepidations and I found myself taking the route of what I just called the worst approach of all — avoidance. I remained silent (and anyone who knows me, knows how hard that is for me). However, just when I was ready to do the typical administrator avoidance approach (checking my all-important e-mail and texts) Kurt Hatch, AWSP's director of diversity, made some

thoughtful references to the book, "Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People." The terms "blind spot" and "good people" seemed to be more engaging and less threatening. Also, the research exposes the pitfalls of the "them and us" paradigm — thus, borrowing from the 60's cartoon character Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he [them] is us."

### A PATHWAY TO SOLUTIONS

MPLN met again in January, and equity was again on the agenda. So given the work done before, I

anticipated an opportunity to dig into this topic and find some ways to engage my staff in the work of equity.

Having read “Blind Spot,” I was enlightened by the research regarding implicit association, hidden-bias blind spots everyone has. When Dr. Caprice Hollins effectively challenged us to get deeper into Equity-Focused Leadership, I was ready to fully engage and grow.

“ So now we can avoid, as President Bush described it, “the soft bias of low expectations.”

Dr. Hollins led with a very important focus as she took us through a series of bias exploring activities to discover our own bias’s knowing we would not immediately change the biases formed through many experiences in our life. However, in recognizing our biases — our blind spots — we could effectively respond in an unbiased and equitable way. So now we can avoid, as President Bush described it, “the soft bias of low expectations.”

Knowing it is not the initial biased feelings we have that we are responsible for, but the rational response considering equity is what reduces the unproductive feelings of guilt, wariness defensiveness and avoidance. It provides a pathway to positive actions.

### MY BLIND SPOT

It is one thing to accept the research behind the implicit associations revealing blind spots, and another thing to start examining myself.

Once I began, I realized why my reluctance to talk about equity was not just the problems I noted earlier. As a white male who grew up in an intact, middle class family with its roots in the Depression

and WWII, I was imbued with an ethic around work, resiliency, responsibility, sacrifice, team and delayed satisfaction. Like most people from the “Greatest Generation,” my parents believed in a no excuses, pull-yourself-up philosophy. It is at the core of American Individualism. They are worthwhile values and not exclusive to white males whose formative years were in the ‘50s and early ‘60s.

However, when equity starts and finishes with the explicit suggestion that all people have to do is simply apply these values, the conversation stops as implicit biases are buried below an explicit value system. Ironically, the success of minorities are used to reinforce the idea implicit bias does not exist and the system works equally for all. When reflecting on this, I realized I excused myself from tough discussions on equity by using that “rugged individualism”

philosophy. But once I identified my rationalizing away my personal responsibility to understand my bias, I knew I was responsible to provide Equity-Focused Leadership for my staff and students.

### FIRST STEP IN PRESENTING THE EQUITY ISSUE

At first, the thought of challenging my staff to explore their implicit biases created a bit of anxiety.

OK, a lot of anxiety.

After taking into account the culture our staff created at West Valley High School, I believe we laid the critical groundwork needed to launch this discussion (and that first step is to remind our staff of what they have done and why it has moved us in toward the equity discussion —equity is the bonding agent for all that we have done to create our Positive Climate at WVHS).

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John Custer presents a breakout session at the 2017 AWSP/WASA Summer Conference.



The three most important pieces of the groundwork:

1. Equity in schools starts with standardized, consistent and rigorous curriculum and instruction. Every student is disadvantaged when we don't provide that across the board for each and every student.
2. A Redemptive Culture must have significant practices built into the system – our retake policy creates an emphasis on engaging

and teaching students rather than sorting out students.

3. We consistently speak to our teaching ethic: "We do not teach a course content and skills to a class of students, but we teach each student course content and skills in each class."
4. Our staff works with several pieces of data breaking out sub-groupings (every three weeks our staff gets a grade breakdown – our 18-week grade check shown below). We know we need to dig

deeper into the data after looking at implicit bias.

If we remind ourselves of the good work done already by good people, we should be able to embrace the topic of equity and implicit bias in order to strengthen the good and guarantee equity for all student. Given I started my own journey in discovering my biases and concluding our staff started on their journey toward equity, I can move forward with the equity discussion with much less trepidation. ■

### 2017-18 SEMESTER GRADE CHECK

EQUITY TOTALS AND GRAND TOTALS	A	B	C	D	F
Minority Male:	40.2%	23.4%	25.0%	8.6%	2.8%
Minority Female:	58.9%	27.7%	8.1%	3.9%	1.5%
Non-Minority Male:	41.0%	26.1%	17.1%	9.8%	6.0%
Non-Minority Female:	47.6%	27.8%	14.5%	6.8%	3.4%
GRAND TOTAL	44.5%	26.9%	15.8%	8.2%	4.6%



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