



Warriors to Advance Equity: An Argument for Distributing Leadership*

by

Larry Leverett, Superintendent, Plainfield Public Schools, New Jersey

You can't mandate things that matter most! Equity matters most to many in our schools and society, and the charge of changing schools and districts to achieve equitable outcomes is certainly something that we have not been able to successfully mandate. Equity is hard work and requires the collective commitment and energy of the entire school or district education community.

Achieving equitable outcomes for all learners is beyond the capacity of individual, highly talented leaders and requires the knowledge and expertise of others in the school or district organization working with a shared sense of purpose. "Equity warriors" are needed at every level of the organization in equity-focused schools and districts. Leaders must build capacity and provide support to multiply the force of contributors prepared to advance the equity mission.

Who are these "equity warriors" and what are their roles? Equity warriors are people who, regardless of their role in a school or district, passionately lead and embrace the mission of high levels of achievement for all students, regardless of race, social class, ethnicity, culture, disability or language proficiency. They view themselves as having the power to influence the teaching and learning agenda in meaningful ways. Equity

warriors often act outside their formally assigned roles; communicate effectively and persistently with diverse publics to influence the core business of schools and districts; participate successfully in cross-functional teams; work to improve their knowledge, skills and disposition; engage in risk-taking; and model these values, beliefs and behaviors for others to emulate in the quest for higher levels of learning for all groups of children and youth.

Equity warriors occupy a variety of roles, including, but not limited to, coaches, mentors, curriculum leaders, classroom teachers, school management team leaders and members, community leaders, parent education specialists, technology coordinators, library media specialists and guidance counselors. They are found laboring in nearly all other roles commonly found in schools and districts. Typically, equity warriors are driven by personal values and beliefs, have an area of knowledge or expertise that they are passionate about, contribute freely to equity work beyond their assigned role and are willing to grow and learn to become more effective in advancing the equity agenda in their school, district or community. Any effort to achieve equitable outcomes for *all* learners requires the presence of these mighty warriors for social justice.

We know through experience, research and documented best practice that school or district leadership models that solely rely upon principals,

superintendents or other appointed, formal leaders to change systems without using the vast resources of the school community are often not successful in developing the needed critical mass to force the abandonment of old paradigms to improve the core business of schools and districts—teaching and learning. The elimination of bad practice in classrooms, schools and districts is more attainable when leadership is spread across the school or district horizontally and vertically and when people in the organization share the zeal and commitment to make meaningful change happen.

An organization cannot flourish—at least, not for long—on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many levels (Fullan, 2002).

We are all too familiar with short-lived change efforts led by highly capable, charismatic school and district leaders. We know that person-dependent change strategies are not likely to result in sustained support of long-term equity agendas. We have witnessed frequent turnover of principals and superintendents and the rapid-fire introduction of multiple, poorly supported improvement efforts that are fragile and have short life spans. The "equity war" calls for many leaders in many different roles who join in

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sustained demonstrations of collective will and internally driven systems of collective responsibility that can be continued even when the principals or superintendents leave. Formal leaders, no matter how talented, cannot make the equity agenda thrive without leadership coming from others in the school or district.

The days of the principal as the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators (Lambert, 2002).

School and district administrators committed to equity must make growing leaders throughout the organization an important priority. They must invest in building capacity, consistently model attitudes, behaviors and practices supportive of creating “leader-full” organizations and evidence a commitment to learning to lead in ways that support others having access to leadership roles. Leaders for equity-focused schools provide staff with the resources they need to grow as equity warriors.

Professional learning communities and high-performance organizations support the wisdom of distributing leadership to achieve organizational goals. Roles in these organizations are not bound by rigid, narrowly defined job descriptions that constrain staff to working in the education version of silos. The collective will of many is obvious in the ownership of the work needed to change outcomes for work. Schools and districts that embrace theories of action based on the distribution of leadership have abandoned overly top-down, reactive, hierarchical, highly centralized approaches that have historically concentrated leadership among a few, mostly those in appointed administrative positions. Appointed leaders in equity-focused organizations embrace a commitment to building learning organizations and provide opportunities for all who share the equity mission to give their gifts, to develop their skills and to have access to leadership that is not

dependent on one’s “place” in the hierarchy or formal organizational chart.

The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, [which] are related to their predispositions, interests, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles... It is the ‘glue’ of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task—culture—that keeps distributing leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling (Elmore, 2000).

Creating conditions that are conducive to growing an army of people willing to engage in a sustained effort to achieve equity is the challenge for leaders in today’s schools. Leadership that embraces collective effort, promotes a shared sense of purpose and mission, engages many in collaboration across roles, and develops organizational cultures that set high expectations for adults and children is leadership that results in a more fertile environment for meaningful changes in the teaching and learning environment.

Driving an equity agenda in our schools and districts requires new thinking about the roles of leaders—a shift from the power and control paradigm to one that concentrates on aligning the culture around a set of normative beliefs, attitudes, expectations and actions.

As school or district leaders in appointed positions, we have choices. We can continue status quo oriented leadership and management styles that limit the expectation for leadership to a small group of formal leaders *or* we can commit to the development of school or district cultures that expand the base of leaders. The decisions we make as appointed leaders influence the depth of support within our organizations for the challenging work of fostering equity. Leaders who grow equity warriors are leaders who are most likely to have the support needed to advance the important work of improving teaching and learning.

There are literally hundreds of schools across America’s landscape that are successfully making progress towards equity. Equity warriors are at work as leaders in these schools and districts. Improved teaching and learning and more equitable outcomes for the learners are occurring. The reality is that schools can make a difference in the quality of a child’s experience as a learner. It takes leadership from across the school or district to increase the probability of making needed changes happen. Distributed leadership provides fertile ground for sustaining long-term commitments to the desired goals of equity. The important work of achieving equitable outcomes for all learners cannot be mandated nor can it be accomplished without the support and expertise of school staff at all levels.

References

- Elmore, R. F. (2000). “Building a New Structure for School Leadership.” Washington, D.C., The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Fullan, M. (2002). “The Change Leader.” *Educational Leadership*, 59 (8): 16-20.
- Lambert, L. (2002). “A Framework for Shared Leadership.” *Educational Leadership*, 59 (8): 37-40.

Selected Resources for Distributing Leadership

Facilitative Leadership: The ERIC Digest on this subject discusses methods of leadership that enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance by fostering the involvement of all personnel.

<http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest096.html>

School Based Management: This ERIC digest discusses school-based management as a strategy for decentralizing decision making.

<http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest099.html>

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) promotes excellence in school leadership.

<http://www.principals.org>

The National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation (NCAELP) examines the quality of educational leadership. Its website contains links to publications that focus on leadership issues.

<http://tiger.coe.missouri.edu/~ncaelp/>