

## SCHOOL COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS AS ALLIES & ACCOMPLICES: PLAYING A ROLE IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

### Get Informed

#### Advocacy is Collaborative Action

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we discuss two approaches of social justice advocacy, allyship and accomplice-ship, and how your actions determine whether you are an ally or an accomplice. We discuss some examples of allyship and accomplice-ship, then delve into some key considerations for critical self-reflection when serving as an ally or accomplice.

### What is an Ally?

**Allyship** is a popular term in social justice work these days. For example, “I’m an ally for the LGBTQ+ movement,” or “I’m an ally for the Black Lives Matter movement,” stated by a person possessing a **dominant identity**, not belonging to the **marginalized community** (i.e. White, male, nondisabled, cisgendered, Christian/Protestant, etc.) (Coomer, Jackson, & Moore, 2019). Sometimes, people who claim to be allies are not working to disrupt oppression on any real level—the self-proclaimed “social

justice warrior” (Moore, Sanborn, Jackson, Martinez Hoy, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

Authentic **allyship** is defined as when “a person with [privileged identities] works in solidarity and partnership with a marginalized group of people to help take down the systems that challenge that group’s basic rights, equal access, and ability to thrive in our society” (Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit, N. D., para. 1). There is a distinct difference between authentic and inauthentic social justice work, a “social justice warrior” vs. an authentic ally.



When self-selecting as an ally, one thinks they are supporting a movement put in motion by historically marginalized groups of people. However, one cannot appoint oneself

as an ally; rather, they must be identified as an ally by the marginalized group(s) (Jackson, Huskins, Skelton, & Thorius, 2020). Stating allyship may make one feel good about themselves, feeling like they are actively supporting a “cause,” if you will. Let’s dissect this popular version of inauthentic allyship a little deeper, introduce the concepts of authentic allyship and accomplice-ship, and discuss how these roles relate to school community stakeholders.

### **Social Justice Activists Aren’t Just for Rallies**

As a school community stakeholder who believes in social justice, you care about educational equity—you believe in a world in which students, regardless of identity, have the right, opportunity, and access to receive a high quality public education. *How* you support the movement toward educational equity defines what kind of advocate you are—an ally and/or an accomplice. As you will learn, they are [“two sides of the same coin”](#) (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 1).

As previously stated, calling oneself an ally and taking pride in supporting a movement is inauthentic advocacy if it does not actually disrupt oppressive systems such as systemic racism, homophobia, ableism, or patriarchy, for example (Moore et al., 2019). You can call yourself an ally in the fight for educational equity, and hear marginalizing language at a school board meeting directed toward parents of Color, but if you don’t say or do anything to disrupt this oppressive behavior, then that is inauthentic allyship.

In addition to working alongside historically marginalized groups of people, one must do the internal work as well to serve as an ally—the critical self-reflection (Jackson et al., 2020; Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016). This decentering of oneself involves listening to marginalized individuals and groups and believing them when they share experiences of oppression, even if you personally have not observed or experienced similar treatment, while also looking internally and reflecting upon your participation in marginalizing behavior—“listen... support, and change” (Atcheson, 2018, Becoming Actionable Allies section). You are in this fight with others toward the greater good. Acknowledge and actively support the struggle, but don’t make it about yourself—assist, don’t appropriate (Jackson et al., 2020).

### **Accomplice-ship Requires a Higher Level of Personal Risk than Allyship**

**Accomplice-ship** is defined as the act of directly challenging oppressive systems of power while risking losing one’s own privilege and comfort, reputation and livelihood, or even safety and freedom, in order to support marginalized groups of people (Jackson et al., 2020).

The action one takes as in accomplice-ship carries with it greater personal risk than the action one takes

in allyship. It’s the intentional, critical action that states your support loud and clear—it’s “more direct and overt” (Jackson et al., 2020, p.3), in a manner which cannot be ignored.

An example of accomplice-ship is the Freedom Rides of 1961, when Black people and White accomplices rode in busses across the South in support of the desegregation of public transportation. Black and White people were physically assaulted as they exited these busses. The White accomplices protested systemic racism by acting in solidarity with Black people as both racial groups risked their physical well-being in order to protest segregation.

To act as an ally or accomplice depends upon the personal risk you want to take. When people with dominant identities put themselves on the line alongside groups of people with non-dominant identities, oppressive systems are challenged with resistance that is indisputable. How you express your support is situational; analyzing the context of a particular situation, you must decide for yourself how you will express your commitment to equity (Jackson et al., 2020).

## **Why You Should Care**

### **Students Need Accomplices**

Structural and systemic barriers that oppress must not only be challenged, but also dismantled and disrupted in the pursuit of educational equity (Jackson et al., 2020; Sanborn, Jackson, Moore, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

For example, say you are a business owner with dominant identities. You have children who go to school and you are a member of that school’s parent-teacher organization (PTO), which consists of parents and caregivers of students in the school, as well as school

community stakeholders (e.g. non-profits and for-profit businesses) that work directly with the school. The PTO learned that a group of students of Color, as well as few white students in solidarity with the students of Color, plan to engage in several protest activities to bring awareness to racism in the school district, including kneeling during the national anthem at the upcoming Homecoming football game, planning a walk out, and circulating a petition to gather support for the district to create a new district-level diversity and equity leader position. The majority of the PTO does not support student activism.

In contrast to the majority of PTO members, you support historically marginalized groups of students when they protest against inequitable school and district policies and practices. You may choose to act as an **ally** to the student activists by supporting their right to kneel at the Homecoming game or plan a walk out without the risk of punishment. You may also sign their petition, or voice your support in a PTO meeting.

In this example, **accomplices** would take the personal risk level further and may kneel with the students during the football game, or join the walk out, putting one's own reputation and livelihood at risk by literally walking side-by-side in solidarity. As an accomplice, you face the possibility of angering fellow parents/caregivers and school community stakeholders in the PTO, as well as the greater school community.

You may want to further serve as an accomplice by having your business sponsor student-led activism activities and events, or you may offer your place of business after hours, or your home, as a gathering place for students to organize and plan. As an accomplice, you are investing and risking a lot by taking a strong, public stance: your business and livelihood; your reputation; and in some cases the safety of your place of business, yourself, and/or your family are all at stake.

How much you are willing to risk personally by acting as an accomplice is proportional to the potential impact of your activism, and, ultimately, proportional to the strength behind your efforts toward the dismantling of inequitable educational systems.

Allyship is good but marginalized students need as many accomplices as they can get. You must determine for yourself when and how to voice your support for students, ensuring that your support is consistent with efforts to disrupt and dismantle policies and practices that are oppressive to students of Color, students who identify as LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, and girls.

There are many “levels and depths of sacrifice” to being an ally and/or accomplice (Jackson et al., 2020, p.4). Social justice advocacy and the fight for educational equity is an ongoing effort (Lazzell, Moore, Martinez Hoy, & Skelton, 2019); thus, you must act responsibly and always remember the intent of the groups with which your actions are in solidarity—remain accountable that you are acting in solidarity and centering their voices, not your own (Jackson et al., 2020).

In order to create lasting impact and real change, your advocacy efforts should be sustainable, working steadily at dismantling systems of oppression (Jackson et al, 2020; Sanborn et al., 2019). This fight is a marathon, not a sprint (Scheurich, 2019).

## Moving Forward

### Social Justice Activism Requires Mid-Course Corrections

Allyship/accomplice-ship are actions that are part of a continuous improvement process—you must always evaluate your efforts and ensure that they are

advancing progress, not inadvertently further marginalizing and reinforcing systems of oppression (Jackson et al., 2020). You are not “helping” in a “white knight” fashion that is coming in to “save the day”—rather, you are a support to the mission of the group of people to which you are acting as an ally/accomplice. Here are some considerations for critical self-reflection as you engage in activism and action toward social justice.

### Critical Self-Reflection: Considerations for Allyship (adapted from Franchesca Ramsey's [5 Tips for Being an Ally](#))



- **Seek to Understand Your Privilege**

Consider the rights and advantages you have due to your dominant identit(ies) that are not afforded to the historically marginalized group(s) of people with which you have aligned. Before you can fight for equity alongside these group(s), you must realize the societal advantages you are afforded and those that these groups of people are not conferred (Jackson et al., 2020).

- **De-Center Yourself**

Serving as an ally requires that you listen to the concerns and struggles of the groups with which you have aligned. Remember, you are not there to “help” these groups, but rather you are there in solidarity—you cannot serve as an ally unless you listen to and understand the issues relevant to the group(s) with which you serve as an ally (Jackson et al., 2020).

- **Do Your Own Research**

It is not the responsibility of historically marginalized groups of people to teach you about their issues and concerns—this is an approach that is a characteristic of inauthentic allyship. Instead, utilize news outlets to

follow current events and do your own research on the concerns of the groups with which you have aligned (Jackson et al, 2020).

- **Do Not Appropriate Group Voice or Efforts**

An ally uses their privilege to leverage the concerns of historically marginalized groups of people—an ally does not speak **FOR** these groups, but rather **WITH** these groups, always considering their concerns and how you are using your privilege to bring these concerns to the forefront. In addition, progress achieved by the group should not be attributed solely to your efforts—these groups do not depend upon you for progress; however, your efforts can contribute to group progress toward their goals (Jackson et al., 2020).

- **You're Not Perfect: Learn and Grow from Mistakes**

You will undoubtedly make mistakes—you may inadvertently offend the groups with which you are aligning, appropriate efforts, etc., despite your best intentions (Jackson et al, 2020). As you make mistakes in the process, sincerely apologize and learn from the experience. Keep moving forward and learning from your actions.

- **Remember You are There to Do the Work**

Serving as an ally involves critical action (Lazzell et al., 2019)—remember you are there to do the work, not just make declarations of support (Jackson et al., 2020).

### **Critical Self-Reflection: Considerations for Accomplice-ship (Ferber, 2010; adapted from [White Accomplices](#), n.d.)**

- **Stay in the Work**

Despite the discomfort that may arise through acting as an accomplice, stay in the work and remember your commitments. Equity work is difficult. Remember the individuals in the group(s) with which you are working alongside—they experience discomfort daily. Remember it is your unearned privilege to be comfortable—you must push through the discomfort and remain committed for the greater good (Jackson et al., 2020).

- **Accept Guidance from the Group(s): You are Not the Expert**

You must remember that you are not “steering this boat” and you are not the captain of this “ship.” Take the lead from the group with which you are serving as an accomplice. Leaders of the group will tell you what actions would be most helpful—you are not the expert here (Jackson et al., 2020).

- **Seek to Understand Intricacies of the Group**

Similar to allyship, accomplice-ship involves keeping your ear to the ground—listening to group concerns and understanding its issues. The group(s) of people with which you are working has been oppressed in multiple, intersecting ways (Lazzell, Jackson, & Skelton, 2018)—seek to understand that interplay and how it has affected the individuals within that group. The group is not a “monolith” (Jackson et al., 2020, p.6); it contains individuals with different but intersecting lived experiences. It is these intricacies about which an accomplice is continuously learning and working to understand.

- **This Isn't About You**

As you have researched and learned about the oppressions of the group(s) with which you are serving as an accomplice, you may feel guilt or shame. Remember that accomplice-ship is not about your feelings, or to be motivated by these feelings. De-center yourself and focus on the realities of the members of the group(s) with which you are working. Be willing to “forsake” your own feelings for the greater good (Jackson et al., 2020, p.6).

- **Remain Accountable to the Group**

As you experience dissonance and discomfort through making mistakes, as well as progress, it may be tempting to stop listening to the group and go solo. Commit to staying accountable to the group. Remember that you are working to center the concerns of the group, not your own; your actions as an accomplice should always reflect the wishes of the group. You should remain accountable to the group in order to ensure that your actions are in alignment with the group's agenda (Jackson et al., 2020).



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## About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.



## Disclaimer

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