

## THE POWER OF ONE, THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE: RECOMMITTING TO EQUITY WORK IN YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY



[Image description: Several people of different skin colors, raising their fists. All that can be seen are their arms and fists. Half of a blurred face of a masculine-presenting Person of Color can be seen on the right.]

**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!**

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we explore why it is important for school community stakeholders to recommit to equity work. In order to further your mission, recommitment requires critical self-reflection and examination of one’s own biases. Recommitment is about a deep understanding of your goals and objectives, and how you situate yourself in your social justice work in relation to historically marginalized groups of people, recommitting to not losing sight of your purpose and desired outcome—systemic transformation that provides an opportunity for all students to thrive in school.

As a school community stakeholder who is pursuing educational equity for students in your district, you may be a week into this type of work, or you may have been fighting for equity for a long time. Even as an unseasoned activist, you may have realized already that the pursuit of educational equity does not have an end point—it is a journey that requires continuous, persistent effort, and a commitment that is relentless (Kohli et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2021). As you know, transformative systemic change does not happen overnight, in any context; but it is especially difficult in an area such as equity, where your school community may be entrenched in systems of power that benefit some and marginalize others.

## Get Informed

### Recommit to the Journey—Equity Work Requires Persistent Interrogation of Your Motive, Power, & Privilege

To continue your efforts, to be effective in your pursuits, you must recommit every day—your devotion and dedication to equity work—in order to maintain a steady course in this journey and to not be discouraged by opposition (Dagli et al., 2019; Leea & Turner, 2017; Moore et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2021).

#### Recommitment Requires Critical Self-Reflection: Contemplating Your Why

Recommitment requires introspection as to your own purpose, motives, and biases—a contemplation and deep understanding of your own power and privilege (Kohli et al., 2019; Paris, 2017), and how it presents itself in your pursuit of equity (Moore et al., 2019). Recommitment requires persistent, **critical self-reflection** and self-transparency (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Moore et al., 2021)—why are you doing this work, what change do you hope to accomplish, and would it ultimately benefit all students, or yourself? What is your understanding of your purpose and what you are trying to accomplish in your equity work? In order to recommit yourself and lead for equity in your school community, you must reflect upon these vital questions (Moore et al., 2021; Radd, 2019; Radd & Macey, 2013). Are you a casual advocate, a weekend activist, or are you emotionally invested in disrupting systems of oppression such that all students have the opportunity to succeed?

#### Who Matters Most in Equity Work: Recommit to Centering Historically Marginalized Students and Families

Just as you engage in critical self-reflection every day in order to be an effective equity leader in your school community, you must also recommit in your pursuit of equity—to center those that matter the most in this work:

historically marginalized students and their families. To recommit, you must always consider and be guided by their needs. Accomplices in this fight can transform inequitable systems into an opportunity for all students to succeed (Jackson et al., 2020; Lazzell et al., 2020; Scheurich & Jackson, 2019).

## Why You Should Care

### Recommit to the Disruption of Oppressive Systems

When you don't thoughtfully and purposefully dedicate yourself to recommit, or when you get exhausted, burnt out, or find that you are caring less, you can become complicit in inequitable systems. When you do not recommit to equity work in your school community, you are reinforcing and failing to combat entrenched systems of harm to marginalized students and their families who don't reflect **dominant norm** (e.g., white, middle class, cisgender, protestant, and heterosexual) (DiAngelo, 2018; Moore et al., 2021). These systems push the values and beliefs of the dominant norm onto marginalized students, further disenfranchising them in the school community (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011, as cited in Sanborn et al., 2019). When you put equity first in all you do for the school community, you fight against oppressive educational systems that perpetuate inequitable access (Paris, 2012), representation (Chen et al., 2014; Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009), meaningful participation (Fraser, 1998), and high outcomes for marginalized students (Moore et al., 2021; Waitoller & Kozeski, 2013). You must recommit to equity work in order to renew your passion, persistence, and dedication to disrupt these traditional systems (Moore et al., 2021).



[Image description: Feminine-presenting Person of Color sitting at a table, gazing left, holding a book in one hand, and an ink pen to their chin with the other hand.]

#### Cultivate Your Critical Consciousness to Disrupt Deficit Beliefs About Marginalized Students and their Families

The continuous and persistent cultivation of your critical consciousness is a necessity in recommitting to equity work in your school community. You must examine your own power and privilege, and contemplate how you have played/are playing a role in the perpetuation of oppressive systems (Radd & Macey, 2013). The realization of your own complicity in reinforcing the values and beliefs of the dominant norm can disrupt **deficit ideology** to which you may subscribe—that marginalized students, their families, and cultures are the problem and need to be “fixed” or “saved” (Moore et al., 2021; Valencia, 1997). When you accept your own role in these systems, you recommit to the pursuit of the eradication of your own biases and deficit beliefs, fueling your passion toward disrupting inequitable educational systems.

#### Recommit to Battle Burnout: Moving from Critical Reflection to Critical Action

Equity work can be exhausting, and burnout is not uncommon in individuals pushing to disrupt inequitable educational systems (Chen & Gorski, 2015). Many areas of this burnout have been studied and characterized in people battling inequitable education systems, and you may identify with quite a few of these:



- **Racial battle fatigue**, where People of Color get tired of fighting against white supremacy and entrenched systems of power and privilege (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020).
- **Discomfort in the disruption of white supremacy**, causing white stakeholders to seek comfort in their “racial safe space” of whiteness and the ideology of white supremacy (Zembylas, 2003), subscribing to the status quo in order to feel more comfortable.
- **Need for acceptance in white spaces**, and thus the conscious and unconscious clinging to the unearned privilege associated with whiteness, in order to maintain acceptance among white peers (DiAngelo, 2018).



[Image description: Two feminine-presenting People of Color, wearing PPE masks, at a protest. One, with an afro, is holding a bullhorn to their face; the other, wearing a hijab, is holding a barely-perceivable sign.]

All of these manners of burnout make one complacent in their social justice endeavors. To recommit to equity work in your school community, recognize the burnout, then question why and how traditional education systems can cause you to become weary of the fight (Moore et al., 2021). When you become exhausted with the work, you reinforce systems of violence that harm marginalized students and families. Recommit to not only critical self-reflection, but also **critical action**—if

you “talk the talk”, then you “walk the walk,” always centering in your work the perspectives, knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Moore et al., 2021), and lived experiences of marginalized students and families (Jemal, 2017; Lazzell, 2019b; Moore et al., 2021).

## Moving Forward

### Tools to Fortify and Sustain Yourself for Equity Work

So, you’re ready to recommit to equity work in your school community. You’re ready to perform the internal reflection and are committed to engaging in critical action. You understand that you need to recommit. Here are some considerations to help you effectively engage in the work:

- Don’t be afraid to be **vulnerable**. Equity work requires honesty with yourself and complete self-transparency. Being vulnerable will help you grow as a person and as a social justice actor (Moore et al., 2021; Singleton & Linton, 2006).
- Have **courage** in all your interactions, even when (and especially if) it’s challenging heavily entrenched systems of power, such as the ideology of white supremacy (Moore et al., 2021; Singleton & Linton, 2006).
- Work with and incorporate the voices of many types of **diverse school community stakeholders** in your work, utilizing their knowledge, experience, and collective power to push for more equitable policies and practices (Moore et al., 2021; Radd & Macey, 2013).
- Work with like-minded individuals—equity-oriented social justice actors—building a **supportive community** that sustains, revitalizes, and renews your enthusiasm for the work (Huskins et al., 2020).

- Step into **leadership roles**, utilizing your autonomy to empower marginalized students and families (Lundy & Swartz, 2013; Moore et al., 2021). This is how you push toward change, using these leadership opportunities to honor and center marginalized students and families.
- Dedicate some time to regular **self-care** activities, despite the inclination to ignore your own wants and needs during consuming social justice work. Self-care can help prevent the aforementioned burnout related to equity work (Lazzell et al., 2019a).
- Feel your feelings—practice **radical love** (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2000; Matias & Allen, 2016; Yancy, 2019). Allowing yourself to “feel your feelings” facilitates self-discovery and critical self-reflection, ultimately fueling critical action and transformative change (Moore et al., 2021)

Recommitment requires acknowledgement of the past, as well as looking toward to the future. In order to recommit to equity work, you must critically reflect upon your motives and goals; those may change as you contemplate your power and privilege, and plan for change in yourself and your school community. Moving forward in your equity work, recommitted and fortified, requires self-care and community. Equity-oriented school community stakeholders are a powerful collective that can create transformative change with lasting impact upon generations of students to come.

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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>.

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[Image description: A crowd of people of diverse races and gender expressions, at a protest. They are all sitting, with their fists raised. One unperceivable person is holding a “Black Lives Matter” sign. A Feminine-presenting Person of Color is holding a sign that says, “I will not be silent.”]



[Image description: Several people of different skin tones standing in a circle, with their hands stacked on one another. Only their hands and forearms are perceivable.]