Key Actions for Transformative Leadership in K-12 Athletics

The collective effort of superintendents, district administrators, building level leaders, athletic directors, coaches, and coaching staff (e.g. assistant coaches, trainers, managers, etc.) is central to achieving equity in public schools. A fundamental responsibility of adults in K-12 athletic programs is to create safe environments for students, including student-athletes. Here are five key actions that support adults to stay the course towards realizing and increasing equitable and safe conditions for all students.

Action 1 Recognize and support student-athletes as people first.

1. Recognize and value the physical, intellectual, cultural, and emotional needs of student-athletes and emphasize their well-being in all decisions and practices.
2. Dismantle **academic racism** by recognizing and prioritizing non-dominant students' in terms of race, ethnicity, dis/ability, gender, gender non-conformity, language, religion, national origin, academic needs, successes, and future possibilities.
3. Put in the effort to build trust and get to know student-athletes' stories and lived experiences. Do this without making it the responsibility of the student-athlete to teach adults.
4. Ensure student-athletes who are closer to experiences of oppression have adults that believe and value their lived experiences and multiple identities. Create an environment where students feel safe being themselves.

Action 2 Implement reflexive and critical practices on and off the playing arena.

1. Engage in structured dialogue with student-athletes to examine how sports are connected to broader current events. This dialogue acknowledges, rather than dismisses, social issues and encourages student-athletes to be critical agents in society.
2. Be an accomplice alongside student-athletes in their activism. Treat student-athletes with respect, believe and respond to the expertise they bring to social topics, and authentically engage in their work.
3. Do not tolerate **anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, ableism, linguicism, homophobia, transphobia**, **toxic masculinity**, and other forms of oppression.
4. Create a caring and affirming space for student-athletes to thrive. Disrupt and eliminate **ableist, linguist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, sexist,** and dehumanizing language and behavior.
5. Build healthy and safe relationships with student-athletes. Uphold athlete-centered coaching practices by ending harmful approaches. Prohibit favoritism, unreasonable demands (including demands to dismiss religious or cultural practices), and unethical behavior.

Action 3 Ensure consequences for inappropriate and harmful behavior.

1. Provide fans, staff, and participants with clear policies that are intolerant of **ableist, linguist, racist, transphobic, homophobic**, **sexist**, and dehumanizing use of language and behavior.
2. Take action on observed, reported or filed complaints. Ensure a transparent and cogent process for investigating alleged harassment, intimidation, and bullying are aligned to the overarching school community policy.
3. Prioritize the well-being of students and student athletes when allegations of bullying, harassment, or hazing of students are made by engaging in a transparent investigation process. Do not assume that the incident did not harm the targeted student. This ignores the victim and minimizes their feelings.
4. Understand and equitably enforce institutional protocols and legal parameters in addressing harmful behavior.
5. Advocate for and ensure district-level and league-level policies that protect coaches and athletics' staff in enforcing consequences for harmful behavior.

Action 4 Center those closest to adverse athletic conditions when creating, adopting, and implementing policies.

1. Assess if sports that have historically prioritized **dominant identities** are favored in scheduling, facilities, equipment needs, and offerings.
2. Require job applicants to be receptive to **culturally responsive pedagogy** in athletics hiring policies and practices. Advocate for equitable treatment of sports and athletes.
3. Establish funded programs to implement ongoing culturally sustaining workshops, certifications, evaluations, and individualized growth plans for athletics staff and leadership.
4. Support coaches and coaching staff in leading or co-leading professional development sessions, promoting culturally responsive practices in athletics involving in systemic professional development. Include athletic staff in systems-wide professional development promoting educational equity and culturally responsive and sustaining practices. It is important to include the athletic staff because they have specialized knowledge and are a core component of student-athletes' education and holistic development.
5. Ensure policies explicitly include transgender athletes, gender non-conforming athletes, cisgender girls/woman athletes, athletes with perceivable and non-perceivable dis/abilities to redress academic racism at the intersections. This includes accommodating alternative locker rooms, changing/lactation spaces, uniforms, overnight travel.

Action 5 **Collaborate across and within school community and governing bodies.**

1. Leverage networks to integrate diverse perspectives in creating and implementing equitable policies.
2. Engage with athletic governing bodies and community organizations that support marginalized youth to deepen organizational relationships that benefit student-athletes.
3. Create convenings to develop a shared understanding of equity-centered policies across conferences, divisions, state and regions.

Glossary

Ableist / Ableism – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility of and to people with dis/abilities.

Academic Racism – The bias that student-athletes of Color at the intersections do not have a meaningful role outside of succeeding in programs outside of academics within school.

Access – All members of the educational community should have entrance into, involvement with, and full participation of resources, conversations, initiatives, and choices which are attentive to heritage and community practices (Paris, 2012).

Accomplice – A person with privilege challenging institutions and systems and being more than an advocate by risking their comfort for equity.

Anti-Blackness – Thoughts and actions that target and perpetuate the dehumanization of Black people.

Critical Agents – An individual with autonomy that engages in deep analysis of the social world around them and takes action accordingly.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy – A teaching practice leveraging lived experiences and cultural expertise of students.

Dominant Identities – Socially constructed characteristics that carry privilege and dominance in a space, such as white, heterosexual, and male.

Equitable – Actions that support and center marginalized people.

Gender Non-conforming – A person who is not a specific, socially-constructed gender.

Homophobic / Homophobia – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility of and to LGBQIA+ people.

Linguist / Linguicism – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility of and to people speaking a language other than English.

Meaningful Participation – Agency and voice are afforded to all members of a community, by intentionally centering members who have been historically on the margins including, but not limited to people living in under-resourced communities, people with dis/abilities, as well as racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse individuals. Multiple perspectives are pursued and valued (Fraser, 1998).

Multiple Identities – The numerous and diverse characteristics individuals use to identify themselves.

Racist – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility of and to people of Color.

Reflexive and Critical Practices – Questioning the logic and/or assumptions underlying particular ideas, arguments, or social constructions. In the context of schools, this type of reflection often leads individuals to question and act on policies that create or maintain unequal power relations among specific groups (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1998).

Sexism – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility against people on the basis of sex or gender, especially women and girls.

Toxic Masculinity – Harmful attitudes, language, and actions favoring stereotypical "manliness" such as aggression, violence, and sexual prowess.

Transphobic / Transphobia – The exclusion, hatred, intolerance, fear, or hostility of and to transgender people .

Other Key Terms and Ideas

Educational Equity – When educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people so that each individual has access to, meaningfully participates in, and has positive outcomes from high-quality learning experiences, regardless of individual characteristics and group memberships (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

Equity-oriented Leadership – Leadership that brings about transformative change towards equity, inspires permanent, positive changes in both individuals and systems to create the conditions for and mobilize efforts toward equity, including an awareness of and attention to the nested nature of our educational systems which pose as barriers towards equity (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

Critical Consciousness – The willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others (Radd & Kramer, 2013).

Critical Language Awareness – Demonstrating an understanding of how language in written, physical, oral and digital forms silence, marginalize or oppress people with less power (Briscoe, Arriaza, & Henze, 2009).

High Outcomes – Efficacy of solutions that benefit all towards self-determination and the ability to act as contributing citizens in a democratic society and global community.

Intersectionality – The study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989)

Meaningful Representation – Providing and having adequate presence of all when decision and choice making, as to examine the patterns of underlying beliefs, practices, policies, structures and norms that may marginalize specific groups and limit opportunity (Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009; Chen et al, 2014).

Privilege – Any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred (Johnson, 2001).