
Special Issue

Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students: The Root Causes of Thriving



[Image description: A bisected tree, with one side thriving in fertile environments, and the other side dying in an arid environment.]

Change is an inside job – whether it's inside the individual or inside the system.

- Dr. Christina Pate

Introduction

Fortifying Ourselves and the Work Toward Education Justice: Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students



[Graphic image description: Group of people standing and hugging together with their arms around each other's backs.]

This special edition of *Equity Dispatch* highlights the critical call-to-action presented by keynote speaker Dr. Christina Pate at the MAP Center's 2022 Equity Leaders Institute (ELI), entitled *Fortifying Ourselves and the Work Toward Education Justice: Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students*. In her talk, Dr. Pate reflected the 2022 ELI's purpose to facilitate participants' understanding of key components and practices that support mind-body wellbeing of the people – both students and adults – within our educational systems.

In her speech, Dr. Pate surfaces the role that mental health plays for all educational stakeholders—nuancing the ways in which minoritized communities of students, families, and practitioners are often over-labeled and pathologized. Attending to the mental health of education practitioners, while committing to disrupting systemic oppression through employing equity-focused policies and practices, is critical to ensuring the holistic well-being for the whole education community. Ultimately, moving towards asset-based ways of approaching mental health, and leveraging peoples' and organizations' strengths, can serve as a starting point for holistic healing.

We appreciate and are honored to be able to share Dr. Pate's keynote with our wider audience; we hope that the urgency in her words resonates with every individual with ties and connections to our educational systems.



Keynote Speech

Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students: The Root Causes of Thriving

[Image description: Group of adults of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender expressions, sitting in a circle of chairs, talking.]

Good morning, everyone! Thank you, Kathleen, for that lovely introduction. I am so delighted to be here with you all today! Your work—and I have been looking through a lot of it—is so inspiring. It's such an honor and a privilege to join you in this space and to continue to learn from you all as well.

So, in knowing that our identities influence the ways in which we experience the world, and our power and positionality in the world, and the lenses through which we perceive and approach the world, I'd like to share a brief description of my identity that I'm choosing to share with you all today that may impact the content and delivery of what I will offer in this keynote.

Including all the things that Dr. Thorius shared with you in my introduction, I'm also a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman. I'm a first-generation college graduate, raised in working class Midwest households and currently middle income, living on Chumash land in what is now known as Los Angeles. And I have lived mental health experiences and trauma.

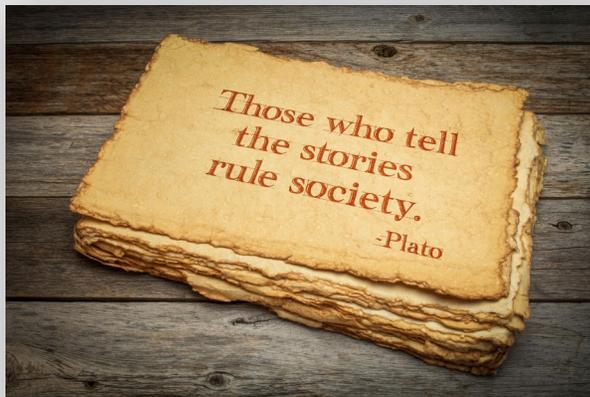
With that, let me share a little bit about the journey I would like us to go on today. Of course, it's an invitation, not a requirement. Not everything that I say will resonate with you. That's okay. Take what you will, and leave the rest. What I will be doing, since we have a short time together, is asking you to simultaneously see yourself as the person, as the human, and also asking you to see yourself as the professional – a practitioner, a leader, or whatever sorts of roles you play. They are so intertwined and so are the concepts that I'm going to be weaving today. So, let's get into it.

As education leaders, we all have varying power to change inequitable structures and systems, but we all need safety and support. We also need strategies and practices to sustain our change efforts.

While often overlooked, the health and well-being of staff is as important as the health and well-being of students and families, especially when we're doing this work in stressful and oppressive contexts—which many of you are. But the research is clear – and is even more evident through the pandemic – that we are rarely caring for ourselves in a way that adequately supports us and the work that we have to do each and every day. So much so, that administrators' stress-related health concerns exceed that of firefighters and law enforcement. We will dig into that a little bit today.

Also important is that we participate in creating and perpetuating disparities and inequities, and we generally cause harm to ourselves and others without even realizing it because we have been embedded and indoctrinated into these systems and structures. So, we want to do some deep reflecting on, and deconstructing of, not just ourselves, but certainly our systems.

So, I'm going to ask you to consider two questions or themes for today because I obviously do not hold the solutions; this community does, as do the communities to where you will return. So, let's consider them together.



[Image description: Handwriting on handmade paper against rustic weathered wood. The message says, "Those who tell the stories rule society. -Plato."]

So, the first question to consider is: ***What narratives do you tell—to yourself and others—about yourself and about others? And what role do you want to have in their deconstruction and re-construction?***

So professionally, I am a psychologist by training, and I consider myself a facilitator by nature. So, not a provider, not a healer, not a fixer, right? But someone who holds space, and facilitates connection, and awareness, and understanding. Someone who creates space for listening and learning, for acknowledging and affirming and celebrating people's experiences, their identities, their hopes, their aspirations, and their fears. And I really work hard to embody these aspects of the work, even though I often make mistakes and I have to revisit and reset—which is the nature of learning.

After going through many struggles and many dark nights of the soul, I learned not only a lot about myself, but a lot about the mind, the body, and the world, and how they all interact. And that is knowledge and wisdom that no educational institution ever taught me or could teach me. Of course, I wish I would have realized that because I wouldn't have spent so much money on student loans! But that is my path, that is my lesson to learn. But that is a whole other topic in itself (haha)!

I came to understand that the psychology I had been taught over-pathologizes people having real life experiences, and responding and reacting to their environments, which are often stressful or even toxic. And what does that do for a practitioner? For an educator? For a leader, right? It leaves practitioners and clients, or teachers and students, or leaders and staff – it leaves us at an impasse. And it leaves researchers disconnected from practice. So not only are we placing blame on the individual rather than the systems and structures that interact with and influence a person, but we are also attempting to solve things at the level of the problem: that's mental, that's behavioral. It's the symptoms. It's just the surface level.

So, through my own personal work and through my work with clients over the years, both individuals, especially leaders, as well as organizations like schools, districts, and agencies, I have learned that not only do we have to shift our way of doing – that’s the strategies, the programs, the practices, right? All the things that we’re bombarded with. But we have to shift from a way of *doing*, to a way of *being*. And that’s on a really different level than what we’re used to. That’s where embodiment comes in.

That requires deep transformational work on many levels—personal, collective and systems levels—to uncover the root causes and really address those in a comprehensive and integrative way. So that’s looking at our biases, our mindsets, our beliefs, our attitudes, the stories that we tell ourselves, and the narratives that society has conditioned us to believe about ourselves and about others, right?

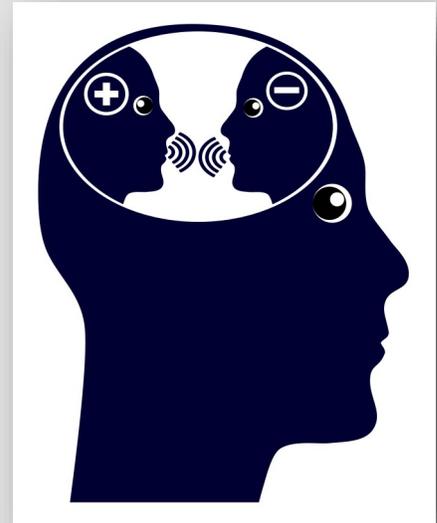
It’s also considering our own physiology and how that affects the ways that we perceive and react and respond, and how it shows up in our health, in our well-being, and in our behaviors. Because behavior is just a communication of underlying needs, right?

Change is an inside job – whether it’s inside the individual or inside the system.

So, when we think about that pathologizing piece, we’re so quick to slap a deficit-based label on people and communities. In fact, our medical system is set up so that you cannot receive mental health support without a mental disorder diagnosis—unless you have some really good insurance that will offer you a few sessions without a diagnosis. Otherwise, you pay out-of-pocket for help. And similarly in schools, you need a deficit-based label or a diagnosis to receive individualized supports and accommodations.

But as a practitioner who has conducted hundreds of psychological evaluations on children and adults, it is shocking to see the number of diagnoses that start so young in a person’s life. I have seen it as early as two or three years old, and it follows them forever. Over the years they’re prescribed more medications, or they get additional labels assigned to them, rather than get better.

And we most certainly over-pathologize and over-diagnose the behaviors of people of Color far more, because the system was created by white men, and generally carried out by white women. Now I’m not saying that legitimate psychopathology doesn’t exist, because it does. And I’m not saying that people do not need professional help for their problems, because some do. But so many people are going through so much in life, and rarely have the adequate tools or the systemic



[Graphic image description: Profile of a face, with two faces looking at each other in its mind, one with a plus sign, and the other with a minus sign. Self talk or inner voice. The internal chatter in the brain with negative and positive thoughts.]

supports to help them heal and transcend. And then they get a label slapped on them – which is so deficit-based and it places blame on the individual when it's often the systems that they live in that create those problems – so, families, workplaces, communities, societies that create so many of these problems.

But it's a setup, people, right? We know this. These systems are perfectly designed to get the results they get. And if we could address these systems, we wouldn't have so many people feeling depressed and anxious in the world. We wouldn't have so many people committing aggressive and violent acts because they grew up in perpetual trauma and violence. We have to help people uncover the root causes of their issues and begin to unlearn and relearn the patterns that have rooted themselves in our minds, in our bodies, in our everyday habits, and how that has influenced the systems we created to perpetrate these problems. But again, simultaneously, we have to heal and transform our systems alongside ourselves and our communities.

Just as important, if not more, is to identify people's assets, their strengths, their aspirations, and leverage those and focus on those. We're always so quick to focus on what is not well. But what *is well*? Why isn't anyone talking about that? Our root causes are for those healthy adaptive things, too. As we are uncovering the things that cause us to stress in life, we have to identify the root causes of what makes us feel good or what helps us thrive, because that is the best prevention. So that way when things start going downhill, which they inevitably will, we can check in with ourselves about those. Check in on our root causes of health and well-being. If any of those are off, we can refocus our attention and our energy on these things. The same is true for communities and organizations. We can leverage, lift up, and focus our attention on those asset-based root causes.

We have to help people uncover the root causes of their issues and begin to unlearn and relearn the patterns that have rooted themselves in our minds, in our bodies, in our everyday habits, and how that has influenced the systems we created to perpetrate these problems.

So, the bottom line here is we want to observe for root causes of thriving, not just struggling.

Now, I talked a little bit about how we pathologize people and communities, but also problematic are the systems, structures, policies, and practices that we have in place to help or support people. This goes both for the education and health aspects of what we're talking about today.

Non-European people historically have healed or dealt with harm through ways very different than what our current systems do. Rather than exclude, they include. Rather than apply punitive practices, they apply restorative practices. Rather than talk it out in a chair with one “expert,” they gather close to the ground in a circle, connecting through community and movement and ritual.

Our white education and mental health systems value compliance, conformity, having it together, sucking it up, indicators of success determined outside of the community, outcomes over process, and products over people. And then this very same system diagnoses sadness, hopelessness, fear, anxiety, noncompliance, defiance, anger, and rage—and then it kicks people out of their support systems, locks people up, or attempts to numb them with medication.

So really, we have parentification, and this happens through vilification, exclusion, or compliance. We expect these systems, these “authorities,” to care for our needs like a parent. However, the so-called “authorities” in education, in health, in justice, will either disparage and shame you, label you, kick you out, or make you conform according to their standards and their rules. And then, if you do conform, sometimes you then can become like a parentified child. Taking care of the needs of the system, rather than the system taking care of you. Meeting the “needs” of the system rather than the system meeting your needs.

And at some point, we have all participated in this program.

Dr. Jennifer Mullan of *Decolonizing Therapy* talks about how we must deconstruct and decolonize our attempt to “fix” people, and save everyone, and do everything. So, when we remove ourselves from the role of “rescuer” or the one who has to take on the burden of everything, like many education leaders do, we both free ourselves and others. We put the power back into the hands of those to whom it belongs to make decisions for themselves as individuals and as communities, and share power to make decisions *with* them, not *to* and *for* them.

No one way is right for any one person or one community. That is why as education leaders, as mental health practitioners, or whatever helping role you're in, we have to guide and support people through *their own* process of learning and healing and transformation. Not one of us has the solution, which is why so many so-called evidence-based practices that have been developed outside of the community are so ineffective, unsustainable, and sometimes harmful.

And we can't do the work *for* people or *for* our communities. But we can hold space for listening and learning, for acknowledging and affirming. We can create space for people to get regulated and connected in safe and supportive ways. We can share our expertise and our knowledge, and we can guide and support others in doing *their* work in a way that works for *them*.

We can help support people in uncovering their true desires, their passions, and purpose, and help them become aware of their mindsets and fears and conditioning of others and by society that holds them back from healing and from achieving their full potential.

But we cannot, in our attempt to help everyone and know everything and do everything, forget that it's not our job to do so! When we get caught up in this over-giving, and over-doing to others, and sacrificing our own health and well-being, obviously we burn ourselves out. I'm sure we have all been there.

Believe it or not, as Nedra Tawwab, therapist and New York Times bestselling author of *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* says, “poor self-care is often a symptom of poor boundaries.” And often when we lack boundaries with ourselves (so maybe that’s getting good sleep, diet, exercise, whatever) or we lack boundaries with others (so people pleasing, appeasing, and over-giving) or we lack boundaries with our work (whether that is time or tasks), we end up unable to care for ourselves and care for others—even though we fool ourselves into thinking we are.

When we give ourselves permission to care for ourselves, we give others permission to do the same.

So, what do you need to support your and your staff's immediate needs while building a community of care that shifts the onus from a single leader to the collective?

So, the last thing I want to do here before we go into the second and final theme is to read a post by [Lisa Olivera](#), who is an author and a therapist, that sums up this section well. She says:

To the healers, helpers, sages, mentors, caregivers, teachers, leaders, and perceived strong ones:

Please remind yourself that being of service doesn't require you to be unaffected by the world

Please remind yourself that being supportive doesn't require you to put aside your own feelings and responses to what is happening externally

Please remind yourself that nurturing those around you doesn't require you to abandon your own ever-changing capacity

Please remind yourself that emotional maturity doesn't require you to find the silver lining or lesson in everything

Please remind yourself that being a helper doesn't require you to always be able to jump into helping immediately

Please remind yourself that being looked to for comfort or guidance doesn't require you to have answers or have what others need from you

Please remind yourself that holding space for others doesn't require you to not need space held for you

[Watermark image description: Sunrise and sea inside Black woman's silhouette.]

Please remind yourself that showing up for your people doesn't require you show up perfectly

Please remind yourself that your identity as a helper doesn't require you to rise above pain

Please remind yourself that you get to honor your humanity, even in the midst of showing up for other people

So, when we remove ourselves from the role of “rescuer” or the one who has to take on the burden of everything, like many education leaders do, we both free ourselves and others. We put the power back into the hands of those to whom it belongs to make decisions for themselves as individuals and as communities, and share power to make decisions with them, not to and for them.

Okay, whew. That was a lot. So, let's take a collective sigh before we move into the second theme for today. On the count of three, I want to you take a nice long inhale in and let it all out. I can't hear you, so really, like, release that. Ready? One, two, three, inhale!

Okay. The next question or theme that I would like for you to consider as we close out here today: ***What does a reimagined system look like? What does it look like to deconstruct and then reconstruct the ways that we show up, the ways that we support, and the ways that we make decisions?***

Let's face it: our organizations, like schools and districts, simply reflect back both the community and the society's wellness as well as the individuals that comprise them – and especially the leaders who set the tone. So, you all as leaders are uniquely positioned to influence not just individuals and communities, but systems as well.

When we're beginning the process of reimagining, and we're thinking about all of the things needed to shift systems in big and small ways, that can be really daunting—and it actually impedes getting started or continuing the process of reimagining and rebuilding, especially when things inevitably become challenging.

So, when you begin such an effort, I strongly encourage you to think big, step small, and navigate mindfully. Because small choices matter.

First, is to consider the paradigms under which we operate. So, in shifting how health and well-being are defined: it's not simply the absence of illness or disease, rather, the inclusion of our physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being, as well as the balance and integration of those – the things that make us whole. It affects how we think and feel and act, and it determines how we handle stress, how we relate to others, and how we make choices.

The same is true for safety. Safety is then not the absence of violence or harm, rather it's the existence of systems and structures that support mutual care, belonging, and interconnection.

Therefore, schools' policies, practices, and values begin to shift toward creating strong communities and places of collaborative learning, healing, and collective well-being. Where change is nonlinear, and it's codesigned at the margins—rather than top-down and determined by those in power.

You know these asset-based, aspirational concepts of, and our approaches to health, well-being and safety are too often absent from our school communities' conversations – as is one's sovereignty, one's agency, one's choice, and our abilities as leaders and practitioners in education spaces to codesign in community with staff, with students, with families, rather than to and for them. Once we shift some of these paradigms, we can shift our mindsets and practices.

If we're thinking about staff or even student well-being, for example: staff who are placed in environments where their nervous system is chronically dysregulated enter into survival mode. So, I'm going to share some of what that looks like. Some of these unhealthy or toxic mindsets and practices can lead to chronic dysregulation or chronic survival mode. And then I'm going to flip to what our reimagined system might look like as healthy or safe and supportive.

So, in that unhealthy climate we have competition; and reimagined: it's collaboration.

Unhealthy is product-centered, task oriented; we prioritize outcomes. Reimagined: It's human-centered, people-oriented. We prioritize process over outcome.

Unhealthy is: we micromanage, we control, we punish, we power *over*. Reimagined: we have agency, autonomy, and support. And we power *with* and *among*.

Unhealthy: we have the inability to regulate our emotions, and we use shame and guilt and fear and humiliation. Reimagined: we have the ability to regulate our emotions, and we're able to channel them into healthy outlets.

In an unhealthy place, we either lack or we have poor boundaries with our work and our availability, and there are unrealistic expectations with our tasks and our performance. In a reimagined system, we have healthy boundaries with our work and our availability, and we have high, yet realistic expectations with tasks and performance.

Last, in an unhealthy place we have urgency culture, persistent deadlines, and we operate in a crisis-oriented way. In a reimagined system we prioritize and manage time reasonably, and we are flexible and adaptable.

Now, once we've deconstructed these things in the unhealthy category, we create space and conditions for these healthy things. And remember, if you have any of these healthy things happening, focus attention on those! Leverage those! Build on those!



[Image description: Four hands, each holding a gear, against the background of sunlight, representing teamwork and cooperation.]

So, what does that mean as leader? It means asking ourselves: What does it look like to partner *with* my staff or *with* my students (depending on the work you do)? What would it be like to co-construct policies, tasks, products, and even our evaluation practices in our organization? What could it look like to co-determine what “success” looks like? Is it about people? Or is it about products, and compliance, and money, and outcomes determined outside of our community?

immediate needs, while building that community of care that shifts the onus from a single leader to the collective?

Because I'll tell you, an organization that takes care of its staff (in this case students as well) has an organization that can run itself. When you create a culture of care in the organization, your staff, your students, and your families will care about the work. We are quite literally wired for connection, people! Our brains and bodies intuitively know this. *It's the systems that have made us separate.*

We have to co-create *with* them, especially those most impacted, especially those with the least power, and especially those at the margins.

Remember: small choices matter.

These incremental shifts can allow you to see the larger system for what it is, to pay close attention to patterns and trends, to notice what is working, and identify leverage points for change.

I have two resources I want to mention before I wrap up today: One is a guide on [Reimagining School Safety](#) that can certainly be applied to any change work in education systems, whether it's your equity work, health and well-being work, and so on. We have another resource called [Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders](#). Both of these resources will take you through activities to encourage, practice, and reflect on the mindset shifts, but also share key resources and offer examples of what making these shifts can look like in practice.

Again, if the tasks begin to feel too daunting, remember that a single individual, a single choice, or a single shift at the micro-level can have profound ripple effects at the macro-level to generate larger systems change. This is a long game, people, right? So, we must fully and wholly care for ourselves, our community, and our organizations, or we will not be successful in these endeavors. We won't sustain as individuals, as communities, as organizations.

I'm going to leave you with a quote from André De Shields. These are his three rules of longevity:

1. Surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming.
2. Slowly is the fastest way to get you where you want to be.
3. The top of one mountain is the bottom of the next. So keep climbing.

Thank you all for allowing me to share this space with you in community today. I know you all have been facing insurmountable odds the last few years with the politicizing of Social and Emotional Learning, and the theories and curricula about race, and the ongoing challenges and inequities caused by the pandemic and racialized violence.

To all of you: I see you. I hear you. I care so deeply about you. And let's make a commitment for us to not only do different or better, but *be* different or better. Really be in the work *with* our staff, our students, and our families—especially those most impacted by harm.

But be kind to yourself. Offer yourself and others some grace. And be patient, prioritize, and then let some things go! We are all in this together and we're doing the best we can. And people do well if they can. Thank you so much.

For more information to support your learning about this topic, please consider these resources from the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center:

- [A Critical Examination of the Profession of School Counseling: Moving Towards Equity-Oriented Leadership](#)
- [Centering BodyMindSpirit in Equitable Education: Towards Pedagogies of Wholeness](#)
- [Promoting Socially-Just, Evidence-Based Practice](#)

About the Author



Christina Pate, Ph.D. (she/her) is a psychologist by training and a facilitator of learning, healing, and transformation. Pate has over twenty years of experience supporting individuals and organizations across public and private sectors including technology, education, public health, justice, engineering, and human services.

Pate brings a range of expertise in strategic planning, systems thinking, social-emotional development and mental health, leadership and collaboration, and organizational climate and culture. Pate supports clients to develop work that fosters personal wellbeing, cultivates stakeholder voice and co-design, centers equity, promotes trauma-informed practice and resilience, and improves cross-sector collaboration to improve outcomes for individuals, organizations, and systems.

Pate has supported clients in expanding their leadership and collaboration capacity to shift mindsets and facilitate transformation as well as build infrastructure and coordinate systems across sectors. She has also coached clients in implementation and sustainability efforts across state and local child-serving systems to promote healthy development and to connect individuals with services and supports.

Overall, Pate works at the intersection of research, teaching, and practice traversing multiple content areas and working across sectors in order to address the personal/individual, interpersonal/collective, and structural/systemic aspects of the whole person, whole organization, and whole community.

Pate currently serves as Deputy Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Center to Improve Social & Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd and leads WestEd's Safe and Supportive Learning Environments body of work. She previously served as the Director of the Equity Accelerator funded by the Bechtel Family Foundation, was the Technical Assistance Lead for the National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative in Atlanta Public Schools and was a Project Director and TA Liaison for SAMHSA's Project AWARE at the Now is the Time TA Center.

Meet the Authors

This Special Edition of Equity Dispatch was written and edited by:
Christina Pate, with introduction and editing by Robin G. Jackson

References

- Kyser, T. S., Filkins, J., Jackson, R. G., Thorius, K. A. K., & Skelton, S. M. (2022). Centering bodyMindSpirit in equitable education: Towards pedagogies of wholeness. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Pate, C., Tilley-Gyado, T., & Betz, J. (2022). *Connecting the brain and body to support equity work: A toolkit for education leaders*. WestEd.
- Sanborn, E. K. (2021). Critical examination of the profession of school counseling, a: Moving towards equity-oriented leadership. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Sullivan, A., Li, A., Nguyen, T., & Bose, M. (2022). Promoting socially-just, evidence-based practice. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Trout, L., Pate, C., Wu, K., & McKenna, J. (2022). *Reimagining school safety: A guide for schools and communities*. [Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd]. WestEd.



VISIT US



Copyright © 2022 by Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

Recommended citation: Pate, C. (2022). Attending to the mental health of educators and students: The root causes of thriving. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Disclaimer: Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. Reference in this newsletter to any specific publication, person, or idea is for the information and convenience of the public and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S04D220003). However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.