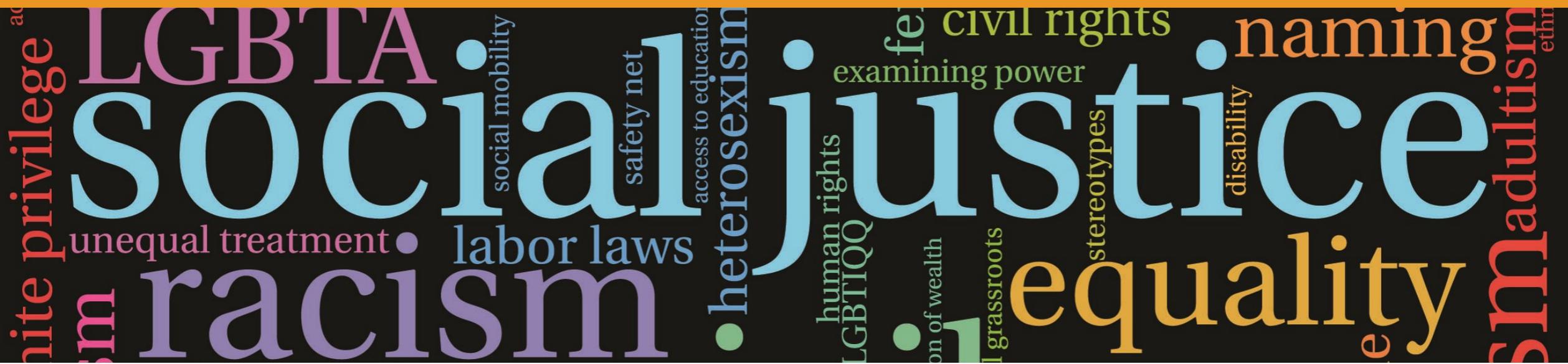


AUTHENTIC SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY IS A LIFESTYLE OF CRITICAL ACTION



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

[Authentic Social Justice Stakeholders Take Critical Action](#)

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we explore the components of authentic social justice advocacy and discuss what it means to take critical action toward equity within the school community. You will discover that social justice advocacy is a lifestyle, comprised of challenging the status quo, having difficult conversations with family, friends, and peers, and living the hard work of social justice advocacy every day.

Social Justice Warriors

Stakeholders and advocates who believe they strive for equity may consider themselves social justice activists, and may even identify with the popular term, “social justice warrior” (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Those who engage in social justice and identify as an advocate for historically marginalized populations often also have privileged identities (non-disabled, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual, English speakers, male, and/or White) (Moore et al, 2019).

Do You Have Privilege?

Privilege is defined as “any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred” (Johnson, 2006). It can be thought of as built-in advantages based on one’s race, sex,



language, religion, sexual orientation, etc., separate from one's level of income or effort (Collins, 2018). That is, you have privilege and a privileged

identity in American society if you identify as non-disabled, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual, English speaker, male, and/or White. This is because societal expectations are based upon the common behavior and characteristics of groups with these identities.

The privileged “speaking for” the oppressed creates a unique situation, where their “help” may not be helping at all. Actually, this sort of “help” can be extremely harmful to the populations these “warriors” are attempting to serve (Edwards, 2006; Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

Performance Advocacy

Do you have a bumper sticker or yard sign that signals “inclusion” (Moore et al, 2019)? Have you participated in a walk-out or march? These are all positive efforts in your advocacy. However, are you taking critical action--moving from these more public forms of social justice activities to actually taking action to interrupt and/or disrupt racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and other structures of oppression every day? You may be inadvertently supporting those structures that you are claiming to want to tear down (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). This is known as “performance advocacy”—superficial actions displaying values that are not internalized and practiced every day (Leonard & Misumi, 2016; McKenzie, 2013).

Be a Role Model for Students Through Your Actions

You are a role model for students through your involvement with the school community. How education stakeholders advocate for equity will be mirrored by the students they serve, whether that is the intent or not (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). Because children model adults’ actions, it is important to ask: “How do we want our students to learn about systemic oppressions and the agency we all possess as advocates of

social justice?” To address the manner in which you are modeling activism to student(s), you need to engage in critical self-reflection, as well as assess your behavior to determine the societal and personal impact of your efforts. Are you practicing the true work of social justice? It’s more than an event, it’s a daily effort—a lifestyle.

Why You Should Care

Performance Advocacy Harms Historically Marginalized Groups

Components of Authentic Advocacy

While “performance advocacy” by those with privileged identities is harmful, authentic social justice advocacy by those with privileged identities is necessary for truly transformative systemic change (Clemons, 2017).

Authentic social justice advocacy means you aren’t afraid to gaze inward and examine your own biases, power, and privilege—critical self-reflection—then engage in conversations with colleagues around inequities, educational or otherwise (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014). Push beyond your comfort zone to interrupt or challenge deficit language, racist jokes, sexist or ableist language or behaviors that further disenfranchise and “other” historically marginalized groups. If problematic, often “hidden” oppressive status quo systems, beliefs, and behaviors are allowed to continue unchecked, then they are perpetuated. Your role as a social justice stakeholder is to call out inequitable and oppressive practices and make them perceivable to those perpetuating and complicit in those systems. This identification and making the issue(s) known is the first step in addressing systemic inequities, and it starts with you having difficult conversations.

Modeling Authentic Social Justice Advocacy Through Critical Action

Students of even the earliest age are very observant, curious and want to understand. When authentic social justice advocacy is modeled by educators, students pay attention and learn what true advocacy is all about (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). They see their teachers naming the problem and having difficult conversations

(Clemons, 2017). In doing so, educators and education stakeholders bring to light the inequities of the status quo, demystifying issues that are usually not talked about in “polite society.” These students see you doing the authentic work of transformational change towards a just school community.

Children observe and absorb a lot more than for which they are given credit. Children are able to see the venue you create with peers for open dialogue and critical conversations about inequity—through this critical action, you create space to ask questions, to identify and name what they are seeing, and, therefore, begin the work of dismantling inequitable and oppressive social structures (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014). The point of an education is to not only prepare students for life, but also to instill in them a responsibility to “make the world a better place”--for all people (Moore et al, 2019). They learn from you that holding these critical conversations is essential to strive toward that goal.

Moving Forward

Critical Action Means Having Courageous Conversations

Disrupting inequitable systems takes tremendous intentionality, courage, effort, and skill (DiAngelo, 2011). How do you truly show up for historically marginalized groups? What are the steps toward being an authentic social justice stakeholder?

Critical Self-Reflection is Essential

The first step toward that goal is to reflect upon your own power and privilege, always cultivating your critical consciousness through these self-reflective practices (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012). Acknowledge your own biases and examine how power and privilege advantage some groups, while disadvantaging others (Hyland, 2009).

Do you have the aforementioned identity privilege?





Do you make assumptions about the abilities of historically marginalized groups of students? What do you consider to be traditional knowledge and

what does that look like to you? It's important to think beyond the status quo perception of traditional knowledge and those traditional holders of said knowledge (Hyland, 2009).

Becoming an Authentic Advocate

Below, you will find some statements to consider and understand in order to grow as a social justice stakeholder. Consider the research-based statements made below, reflect upon them, and grow in your understanding of your role in inequitable systems, and what you can do to change it and develop as a social justice advocate:

1. Educational equity should be your goal as a social justice stakeholder. Systemic change toward that goal requires a transformative approach (Skelton & Kyser, 2015).
2. There is no "quick fix" to issues of educational inequity. Be wary of "quick fix" solutions, as they can further harm historically marginalized individuals (Clemons, 2017).
3. In order to disrupt further marginalization of individuals, value, respect, and, most importantly, center the voices and lived experiences of historically marginalized individuals (Clemons, 2017).
4. Critical self-reflection means you ponder and acknowledge your role and complicity in the oppression of marginalized individuals (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).
5. Critical action means you hold courageous conversations about how the marginalization of nondominant groups has benefitted you as an individual, as well as benefitted dominant groups (Castagno, 2014).
6. Critical self-reflection involves daily consideration of how your own power and privilege benefit you (Castagno, 2014).
7. Understand that many nondominant groups experience compounding multiple oppressions daily (Castagno, 2014).

8. Oppressive inequities have a tremendous, continuous impact upon marginalized families and communities (Castagno, 2014).
9. Understand that you can't accurately represent or speak for individuals with identities that you don't possess (Clemons, 2017).
10. Individuals can be members of dominant and nondominant groups simultaneously (White and transgender, or African-American and male, for example) (Jackson et al, 2017; Lazzell, Jackson, & Skelton, 2018).
11. Authentic social justice stakeholders engage in critical conversations with everyone (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).
12. Authentic social justice advocacy is a way of life that requires dedication, commitment, effort, and vigilance (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

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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. This Equity Digest series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support 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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