



“Looking for a Partner”

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- DEI Director

The 2020-2021 school year dawned in the midst of a burgeoning global viral pandemic and a growing national racial justice movement, and in anticipation of a potentially divisive national election in November. Many have referred to the last six months as a moment of reckoning for our entire nation. Given the weight and significance of this time, schools have both strived and struggled to “meet this moment” to be communities that live out the best of their values. This Position Paper pays particular attention to the national movement for racial justice and equity. Six months ago, we asked DEI Directors of schools to offer advice to their School Heads for the upcoming year.

Halfway through this school year, we checked in with DEI Directors to pose a single question:

Since the start of the 2020-2021 school year, how has your school been successful in addressing racial inequity and injustice, and creating an antiracist school? Conversely, what challenges do you hope your school will address in these efforts in the second half of the school year?

The responses we received paint a picture of schools making progress, making mistakes, navigating resistance, and continuously seeking ways to unite their communities to ensure the dignity of all students. This paper will share and examine responses aligned along these three major themes:

- **Progress Being Made**
- **Challenges and Backlash**
- **Planning Ahead**

It is important to note that, within each of these sections, the benefit of **leadership and communication that is clear, direct, and transparent** emerges as a theme that can be threaded throughout all responses. As suggested by the title of this paper, success and progress at schools are found when this type of leadership leads to authentic and fearless partnership among all of a school’s constituents in the movement for racial justice.

“Our school very successfully kept its commitment...” Progress Being Made

The work of racial justice has no clear endpoint. It is an ongoing effort more accurately reflected as a “way of being” among individuals in a community than measured with an artificial “finish line” that seems impossible to reach. It is work that transforms cultures and pushes against deeply rooted norms and expectations, particularly within school cultures. In spite of the immense challenges and the seemingly infinite nature of the work, DEI Directors were able to name concrete growth and successes that have taken root in the last six months.

- “Amazingly, in the midst of being off site since September, our school very successfully kept its commitment to roll out a new, coordinated DEI/Racial Literacy Curriculum that was created as a summer project. The administration kept its eye on this goal and did not let it get lost in the scramble that was on site learning in a pandemic.”
- “We also had two staff POC affinity groups meet officially for the first time and the school is continuing its collaboration with the parent body while continuing to investigate sources of professional development for the staff as the curriculum is being introduced to the students.”
- “Since the summer, we now have an Administrative Diversity Committee (ADC) that oversees all administrative diversity work... as well as a Diversity Leadership Team (DLT) that is more student and faculty facing.”
- “We are working with all school constituencies to create equity in our school. From faculty training to curriculum review to affinity groups for students, faculty and staff we’re implementing protocols and policies that will create a sense of belonging for all students.”

As indicated above, the most common areas of success referred to by DEI Directors usually involve the implementation of new racial literacy curricula, appropriate changes to the structure of and support for the school’s DEI staff, and an increased level of engagement in DEI work across all school constituents. However, DEI Directors also point to the fact that these efforts are built upon a foundation of clear leadership, a school’s desire to build capacity for DEI work among all constituents, and communication from leadership that is unfailingly direct and consistent.

- “For five years now we have used a distributed leadership model to increase competence across the organization and that has really taken root and bloomed for us!”
- “We are more transparent in our DEI efforts. We had programs taking place, but never shared them with the community. Too many parents and alum were surprised with the work we had been doing. The challenge is that it is not enough, and it never will be - but that doesn’t mean you stop innovating.”
- “We have taken up the vision to be anti-racist school and a school that stands behind Black Lives Matter. We have declared both intentions to our greater community, we are building our internal capacity to understand what this work entails and grow our own learning, and we are having conversations and training at every level of the school including the Board and parents.”

“One cannot delegate or outsource one’s personal DEI mindset...” Challenges and Pushback

In spite of a movement for racial justice and a national moment of racial reckoning that have been [named at the highest levels of government](#), the major obstacles to achieving greater equity have not been removed from schools. In addition to the more common institutional impediments to DEI work, such as prioritizing time and space for these efforts, DEI Directors also report that resistance to DEI work among some school constituents have only strengthened and become more concrete in the last six months.

- “We need more specific and deliberate time to develop not only anti-racist curriculum but also more direct PD within the admin team so that all supervisors can keep teams accountable and motivated.”
- “With very little time or energy given to the trauma students and faculty have been and continue to be facing during this pandemic, we have more tension and stress, and feel more divided in our school than ever before.”
- “Of all our constituencies, the parents are the slowest to move and are in need of the most education around DEI in order for them to truly be culturally responsive members of our school community.”
- “We have seen a great deal of pushback from our constituents - some have expressed their displeasure in the DEI initiatives and have threatened to withhold their donations and the onus is on the DEI Director to respond to these individuals instead of publicly stating the commitments and support from the leadership team behind all DEI initiatives.”

When DEI Directors wrote about the successes they have experienced in their school communities, they often referenced the support the efforts received from senior leadership teams. Similarly, where challenges and struggles are named, the point to a lack of clarity, innovation, and personal engagement from senior leadership.

- “My concern always is that there are no directives from the head of the school on DEI initiatives. It is always an afterthought to the detriment of those who are very passionate about the work.”

- “I do not think our leadership team applies the definition of insanity when considering grading policies or hiring practices: If you continue to do what you have always done you will continue to get what you have always gotten.”
- “Executives are trained to delegate and outsource in order to be effective. One cannot delegate or outsource one’s personal DEI mindset any more than one can outsource or delegate loving a child or partner, getting in shape, or spiritual practice.”

The notion of developing “one’s personal DEI mindset” and the advice offered by DEI Directors is exceedingly powerful: Progress towards racial justice and equity is inhibited when all constituents lack personal investment, particularly among white administrators, teachers, parents, and students. If people of color are the only people to center racial justice within a school community, true equity will never be achieved. As one respondent poignantly notes:

- “The people of color in our community are not looking for a benefactress or benefactor—that is the very definition of privilege and white supremacy—they are looking for a partner.”

Racial justice should not be viewed as merely the domain of people of color within a school community. It should be a mindset and priority given equal weight and passion by the white members of a school community. It is only when the work of racial justice becomes a truly multi-racial effort that the greatest threats to progress will be removed.

“We will need to work smartly...”

Planning Ahead

In the next six months, DEI Directors expressed the most hope in creating structures and forums to advance the conversations about racial justice that will translate into policy changes and a greater sense of inclusion for people of color within their school communities. Significantly, some of the most important “learning” that is suggested is not directed at the students, but at the adults in school communities, particularly faculty and administrators. These constituents are viewed as particularly important in laying the groundwork for a community’s transformation.

- **“Moving forward, there is energy and momentum toward investigating student affinity groups. That is the area that needs to be explored second semester as well as how to continue supporting the faculty in terms of DEI professional development.”**
- **“I think for the second half of the school year, I would like to see it start to address how the structure/organization and make-up of the school can better support equity and justice long-term.”**
- **“My hope and goal will be to have all our senior administrative team ready to craft clear, articulated strategic plans for each of the relevant arenas of recommendation, and to have equity strategic direction clearly integrated into all arenas of the school moving forward. We will need to work smartly to keep the important momentum built through the last few months!”**

For all of the progress made and conversations started in the last six months, it often seems that more questions about the work of racial justice have been asked than fully answered. Appropriately, one respondent used the survey to pose a question back; one that could easily be used to frame the work of the next six months and all that will follow:

- **“The challenge remains: How will we implement concrete changes in how we teach, in our policies and processes, in our culture, how we speak and communicate that creates a climate of equity?”**



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Every Voice Matters.