

# Developing Principals as Equity-Centered Instructional Leaders

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**M**any would argue that one of the most egregious contributors to the achievement gap is the opportunity gap. Over the past several years, we have become more keenly aware of the pervasive nature of opportunity and achievement gaps in many of the schools serving our most vulnerable students. These differences in opportunities, supports and outcomes represent some students' limited access to excellence in all aspects of their education. Students often don't have full access to such resources as quality pre-school education, the highest quality teachers, maximum amounts of instructional time, enriching life experiences, college preparatory curriculum, engagement with rigorous content and authentic learning that allow students to develop and create meaningful, useful outcomes and the supports essential for student success. The challenge for principals is to ensure each and every student has the opportunity to engage in a quality education experience. To meet this challenge, both equity and excellence must be driving forces in the leadership of schools. Principals must be equity-centered instructional leaders.

The achievement gap has been a nationally visible concern since the Coleman Report era of 1966. Most educators would agree that this gap is perhaps our schools' most onerous manifestation of inequity. It represents disproportionately disparate opportunities and learning outcomes between and among students of color and poverty with their wealthier counterparts, many of whom are white. It also reflects disparities between English Language Learners (ELL), special needs students and other groups of students. Additionally, there is a disparity between the academic performance of many students and the academic expectations established by the new, more rigorous state standards. And, there is the gap between our U.S.

students and their counterparts in other countries, a disparity which some suggest has cost our country trillions of dollars (McKinsey, 2009).

Most of us will acknowledge that the vast majority of teachers work hard at their craft, are fully committed to student learning, and willingly engage in their own continuous learning. As we know, however, the students with the greatest needs academically too often have less experienced or less skilled teachers. According to Haycock and Crawford (2008), a study (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006) in Los Angeles showed that students taught by teachers in the top quartile of effectiveness advance, on average, approximately five percentile [points](#) each year compared with their peers. Those taught by teachers in the bottom quartile of effectiveness, *lose*, on average, five percentile points, compared with their peers. Moreover, these effects are cumulative. The same study suggested that if all black students were assigned to four highly effective teachers in a row, this would be sufficient to close the average black-white achievement gap. Less competent teaching can result in students being assigned work that is sometimes not on grade level, not aligned to the expectations of the standards and lacking the kind of rigor necessary to build students' capacity to think critically, use knowledge to build new knowledge and apply their learning to real world problem-solving. These kinds of learning experiences can result in disparities in outcomes both in test scores and in the level of educational attainment for different groups of students whenever they exit our systems. The economic and social impacts of the opportunity and achievement gaps, coupled with the moral challenges, should give all of us — educators, parents, the business community, politicians, lawmakers — reason for serious concern.

Yet, with all that we already know, some *still* ask, “Why does it matter?” It matters because a quality education is for many, particularly our most vulnerable students, the *only* pathway out of poverty. A young person's college and/or career readiness can enhance his/her potential for [jobs](#) that can help secure a decent standard of living and an opportunity to thrive in a society where some suggest the middle class is shrinking (Parlapiano, Gebeloff, & Carter, 2015). While schools cannot do this work alone, they have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that every student exits our systems with the knowledge, skills, competence, confidence, creativity, curiosity, tenacity, support, sense of advocacy and efficacy to access and succeed in college, careers and society.

I have been an urban educator since the days of court-ordered desegregation. I have served as a teacher, a staff developer, a counselor to students with severe discipline issues, a high school principal, assistant superintendent,

chief academic officer, and a number of other academic roles. I have also worked outside of education in the private sector and at the university level, working side-by-side with school leaders supporting their efforts to transform their school systems in order to educate *all* students well. I have seen many students of color and those living in poverty survive and even thrive in our public schools. But I have seen far too many who did not survive our school systems and instead, fell onto pathways of limited- or under-employment, poverty and even more destructive lifestyles of drugs, crime and incarceration. I realized years ago that my passion lies with the education of this vulnerable population of students and that my calling as a teacher is to work with and support the adults, the leaders who are charged with educating students in school systems.

The research remains clear: Among school factors, the teacher is the most influential on student achievement, and the principal is the second most influential factor (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom 2004). To ensure excellence, equity and a quality learning experience for every child, in every classroom, every day, and to close these gaps, the principal, and other school leaders, working alongside families, must demonstrate equity-centered instructional leadership. Equity-centered leadership is essential because, through a sharp equity lens — i.e., the process to diagnose and assess equity within the culture, policies, programs, practices and processes within a school — leaders model and set direction; they shape an environment where equity and excellence are the standard for everything; they develop people personally and professionally; and they make the organization “work” so that teachers and school-site staff can engage in effective teaching, learning and support (Leithwood, 2004). I address two essential questions in this article:

1. *What is the work of an equity-centered instructional leader in the improvement of instructional practice in order to improve student achievement, eliminate opportunity gaps and close achievement gaps?*
2. *How do we build the capacity and expertise of principals to equip them to be equity-centered instructional leaders of schools that ensure equity so that every student experiences excellence in their learning and achieves at high levels?*

## **What is the Work of the Equity-Centered Instructional Leader?**

According to *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2015, more than 20 states now have legislation requiring that student test scores be a part of teachers' evaluations. What might now intensify, particularly in low-performing schools, is instruction that focuses primarily on the test, or student acquisition of facts, which, unfortunately, can be fragmented within and across disciplines, but are necessary for the "test." In these situations, the students' work is primarily about recall, memorization and following the right procedures and processes to get to the "right answers." For many students, teacher expectations are low, and there is little belief in student potential. Note these results from the Metlife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success (2009) ED509250:

- Most teachers (84 percent) said they could enable all of their students to succeed academically; yet only 36 percent strongly agreed that all of their students have the ability to succeed academically.
- In 2008, half of secondary school teachers said that their classes had become so mixed in terms of student learning abilities they could not teach students effectively.

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Unfortunately, some educators can come to accept mediocre student performance or even failure as normal, inevitable and outside their control. We see this phenomenon particularly in schools serving our most vulnerable students, students of color, students living in poverty and growing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs). If we are going to improve the learning experience for these students and increase student success, we must dramatically improve instructional practice, establish non-negotiable standards of excellence for each and every student, leverage teachers' beliefs in their ability to teach students, and provide teachers with as much support as possible to do this challenging work. This is the core work of the instructional leader, and s/he must do this work using an equity lens.

The improvement of instructional practice is perhaps the most important task of the school principal. Recent research shows that principals typically spend an average of 8 to 17 percent of their time in instructional activities (Jerald, 2012); that's about three to five hours per week (Supovitz & May, 2011). This research also suggests that some of the work principals do lacks the instructional focus needed to improve teaching and learning. Over the past few years, through the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the University of Washington *Center for Educational Leadership (CEL)* has been working with several school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) on a knowledge-development project to support principals as instructional leaders. We initially found no consensus among these districts on the leadership practices principals should implement to improve the quality of teaching. This lack of consensus led us to develop a framework of high-leverage instructional leadership practices essential to the work of improving teaching quality. We fully acknowledge that there are a number of ways to articulate high-leverage leadership practices. *What is most important is that schools and districts have a shared vision and common language around the essential work of equity-centered leaders who seek equity and excellence for all students.*

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The framework that follows is just one of many research-based examples. This framework is not the sum total of everything a principal or schools need to do to be successful, but rather some of the most salient equity-centered practices that can help improve teaching and learning. Based upon our research and fieldwork, we identified four dimensions of instructional leadership:

## 4 DIMENSIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP™

The 4D™ instructional leadership framework identifies a vision for principals and other school leaders who want to improve instructional practice. The framework is organized into 4 dimensions:



VISION, MISSION AND  
LEARNING-FOCUSED CULTURE

IMPROVEMENT OF  
INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

MANAGEMENT OF SYSTEMS  
AND PROCESSES

Let's look closely at these four dimensions of the instructional leader's work and focus carefully on the *embedded equity practices of effective instructional leaders*.

1. **Vision, Mission and Learning-Focused Culture** – In *Shaping School Culture*, Deal and Peterson (2009) gave us this widely quoted perception, “Culture is the way we do things around here.” The equity-centered principal must shape and nurture a culture that integrates an inclusive approach to schooling where collaboratively, the staff and community are all committed to *each* child's academic success. The work must be grounded in equity and designed to achieve this goal. The principal must foster a learning-focused culture, based upon data-driven goals that establish high performance expectations for students *and* adults, and a climate of respect for every person, and for collaborative work. It must be clear that “around here,” diversity in ethnicity, gender, culture and languages are all valued. “Around here,” we recognize that we all bring similarities and differences, and we respect our differences. “Around here,” we engage positively with one another by listening and learning from one another's stories. “Around

here,” we strive for excellence in all of our work. “Around here,” we provide opportunities for rigorous learning experiences for every student, every day, in every classroom. We ensure that students have the supports necessary to be successful in this learning. Finally, “around here,” we share responsibility for achieving our goals for all students and living our school mission.

- 2. Improvement of Instructional Practice** – The highest leverage leadership practice for the improvement of student achievement is perhaps the improvement of instructional practice. Every school needs a high-quality teacher in every classroom. Achieving this goal begins with the leader using a research-based instructional framework which describes the essential elements of quality, equitable instruction and is used to create a shared vision and a common language among all educators. At CEL, we developed the *5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning*, an instructional framework that serves this very purpose. Equitable instructional practices, including culturally responsive instruction, a classroom culture of respect, differentiation, scaffolding, students’ engagement in self-assessment, “accountable talk,” and authentic intellectual work, are embedded throughout the framework. Approximately one-third of the school districts in the state of Washington are using this framework, as are other districts around the country. School leaders should use a research-based framework consistently to conduct learning walkthroughs and to observe classroom instruction, gather and analyze the data from the observations, provide targeted feedback to teachers, and provide coaching and professional learning to support the improvement of instructional practice.

Three years ago in Central Kitsap School District in Silverdale, Washington, the superintendent, cabinet and union leaders made a commitment to provide the professional development necessary for all school leaders to build a shared vision and common language around quality instruction. They used as their framework the *5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning*. This work was also coupled with an intensive focus on the culturally responsive classroom. In these classrooms, teachers are intentional about making strong links between culture and learning. Expectations are high for every student, and teachers build upon the students’ life experiences. Geneva Gay described culturally responsive education as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2002).

Principals and teachers understand that immigrant students and students from various cultures make significant transitions or shifts between home and school every day. Academic expectations for *all* students, however, are high, and there are scaffolds of support for student learning. Principals foster a supportive environment and build a sense of community that enables teachers and students to connect. Principals also model what Brown (2011) in *Leading Schools for Equity and Excellence* refers to as academic optimism. They work constantly to create a sense of collective efficacy among staff, students and parents/families. They create a sense of trust and cooperation among all stakeholders. Everyone's work is about academic excellence for each and every student, and social endeavors support this academic emphasis (Brown, 2011). In addition, principals provide teachers with the resources and professional learning needed to understand the role that culture and language play in learning and the implications for their teaching practice. Leaders in Central Kitsap decreased discipline issues by increasing culturally responsive classroom interactions. Culturally responsive instruction resulted in increased learning time for students who would otherwise be sitting in the office.

Finally, principals learned to lead learning walks to observe and analyze instruction, identify both positive and problematic trends across classrooms, and engage together in problem-solving regarding issues of teaching and learning. The district subsequently engaged all of its teachers in professional learning to help ensure they have the same vision and common language around quality instruction and deep understanding of, and skill in, the delivery of culturally responsive instruction. Assistant principal Craig Johnson says, "Teachers are now having more conversations with each other, working collaboratively more often because we're all using the same language." (Fink & Rimmer, 2015.)

Based upon our experience in schools, we have seen evidence of the impact of a principal's focus on instruction, quality learning experiences in teacher and student engagement, and culturally responsive classrooms. As an example, Principal Airola (Indianapolis Public Schools) guided staff to trust students more and decrease the amount of time that students stand in lines during the school day. He then insisted that if there had to be a line, teachers were to use "line time" to engage students in some academic activity such as chorally responding to quick questions, verbalizing multiplication facts, or reciting poetry. In a number of our partner schools, we see evidence of the principal's leadership through the emphasis on student engagement practices that help ensure every student is participating in the learning experience. Typical examples of these strategies include student "turn & talk" opportunities

before one student provides an answer for the class; student use of white boards, requiring every student to respond in writing before one student gives an answer; the use of clickers, which gives every student an opportunity to respond individually and gives teachers instant information on individual students and the class as a whole; and teachers' use of equitable strategies for calling on all students to respond to let every student know that everyone is expected to be prepared, and to ensure teachers are not inadvertently giving preferential treatment to some students over others in soliciting response and dialogue in classrooms.

A second way that principals focus on instruction and quality learning experiences is by ensuring all students are provided much more than just basic skills and drill for the tests. Students also engage in authentic intellectual work, allowing them to construct knowledge and create products that can be used in real life, rather than just reproduce knowledge. Doing so helps students build metacognition and a stronger sense of responsibility for and sense of partnership with adults in their own learning. Further, all students have opportunity and access to rigorous learning, problem-solving, project-based learning, honors, the arts, the sciences, language, technology, and the support to be successful within and across disciplines.

- 3. Allocation of Resources** – Principals have the responsibility of ensuring that resources such as time, money, specialists, coaches, expertise, space and technology are deployed efficiently and equitably, particularly in the face of dwindling resources. Effective leaders therefore use data to make *strategic* decisions about the allocation of these resources. They work collaboratively with staff and use a continuous cycle of analysis to examine, assess and then refine the use of resources. These leaders, along with their teams, pose questions like the following to help in their decision-making: *What are the varying needs of our students, and how do we allocate resources equitably to address priorities? Are we doing anything that is not aligned to our goals? What is the impact of the programs we are funding? How do we use instructional coaches, mentors and other teacher leaders to improve instructional practice?*

The equitable allocation of resources is often a very difficult task for principals and one that can create political nightmares for leaders. Acknowledging that the academic expectations are the same for all students, but that students have varying needs for achieving those expectations is palatable for most staff, parents/families and community members. But the instant it appears that a student or a group of students receives more money, more time, more

intervention, more instructional expertise, or more support of any kind than some other student or group of students, the challenge begins. Principals and other leaders are accused of taking from some students to give to others. Jerry Weast, former superintendent of the Montgomery County Public schools in Maryland, is one of the most successful leaders in the area of rigorous outcomes for all students. Weast differentiated resources and instruction to ensure all students reached the outcomes. I once heard him say that he had to help constituents understand that the allocation of resources applied to *all* students. Some may need academic intervention while others might need tutorials in advanced mathematics. Some students might need academic support while others might be in buildings needing facilities enhancement. He worked with his community to help deepen understanding that the equitable allocation of resources was not just for our most vulnerable students who are struggling academically, but was a principle to be applied for *every* student.

**4. Management of Systems and Processes** – In terms of people, structures and processes, there are a number of tasks principals must fulfill. The highest leverage in terms of equity includes, first of all, getting the right people in the right places. Principals have varying degrees of responsibility for recruiting, hiring, developing and supporting staff. Identifying people with the necessary skills, culturally responsive approaches, belief systems and commitment to the achievement of every student is essential. One of the essential skills leaders must bring to this process is their own cultural competence and the skill to ascertain the degree of cultural competence in others. Many have found that the typical written application and interview process does not give sufficient information about candidates' values, beliefs and level of cultural competence. Many have found a bit more success in rethinking the hiring process and shifting to a performance-based process where applicants are presented with real-world school situations and asked to problem-solve on site rather than simply answering textbook type interview questions.

Second, the principal must ensure that key structures, systems and processes are in place to facilitate communication, collaboration and accountability among colleagues. Teachers must have the time and space to work together. Being able to work together using a range of qualitative and quantitative data to identify problems and strengths of student learning and support, and then to engage in collaborative reflection, problem-solving and leveraging strategies, empowers staff and can strengthen relationships, trust and the culture of learning. One of the key challenges that we see with principals when it comes

to collaborative structures is that of *knowing how to plan time* — time for their own instructional leadership work as well as collaborative time for teachers. Another critical system principals need to focus on is that of accountability. Doing so requires systems for the collection, analysis and use of a range of qualitative and quantitative data to inform all work, monitor the student and school performance, assess the effectiveness of the work and be in dialogue to make decisions about next steps.

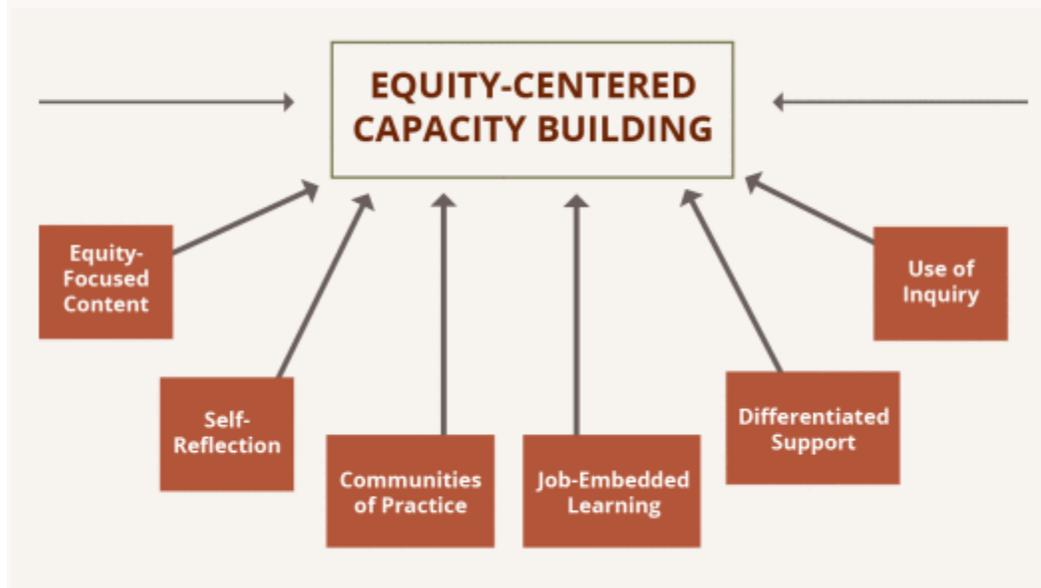
Finally, considering all of the initiatives in which schools and districts are engaged, there are two critical tasks for principals relative to initiatives: 1) ensure that every initiative is well aligned to the vision and goals of the school, particularly for struggling students; and 2) make certain that the staff understands how all of the district and school initiatives are integrated, aligned and support the vision and mission of the school. The alignment and integration of school initiatives can be extremely challenging, and when not done, or not done well, can result in fragmentation, poor communication, lack of focus, isolation, mistrust and, quite frankly, a bit of chaos. For this work to be done well, a number of processes must be in place: There must be clarity and agreement on a shared vision and mission grounded in equity and excellence; there must be a widely understood theory of action about ways to address problems of practice at all levels; and there must be clearly articulated measures of success and a school-wide commitment to adopt only those initiatives that are aligned to the vision and that address the defined problems of learning, practice and support. Finally, leaders must ensure there are equity-based systems in place for ongoing assessment of program implementation, performance management, and student and school performance. Accomplishing this degree of clarity, alignment and systems is a significant feat, requiring ongoing reflection and refinement.

Some principals have limited skill and/or confidence in building and engaging the leadership capacity of others. It is clear, however, that one person cannot do all the work of school leadership, nor should one try. Leadership of a school should be the work of a team of leaders; and the principal should be the leader of these leaders, working in partnership with families and communities.

## **Building the Capacity of Principals to be Equity-Centered Instructional Leaders**

Clearly, leading from an equity stance — that is, leadership that is grounded in and driven by a belief in equity and excellence for each and every student —

is the right work. But as we have learned through our partnerships, it is hard work. It requires leaders to have an exceptional knowledge base and expert skills in classroom observation, analysis and feedback when it comes to leading for change in teaching and learning. It also requires leaders to be self-aware, courageous and resilient in the face of bias, cultural misunderstanding and resistance. So, how do we build the capacity of principals and other school leaders to be equity-centered leaders? We have found that there are at least six critical elements of effective professional learning designed to build this capacity.



Equity-centered capacity building is a complex process coupling both structural and technical processes with those that are more social, cultural and political (Petty, 2015). School leaders must be aware of and attentive to issues of race, class, power and privilege and their implications for policy and practice. If leaders do not understand quality teaching and learning; if they cannot observe and analyze instruction; if they cannot provide teacher feedback that can change practice; and if they cannot establish a culture of learning, then the likelihood of improving student achievement and closing opportunity and achievement gaps is limited. The structural/technical and social/cultural/political approaches are not mutually exclusive; both are necessary for the work of building the expertise of leaders to lead an equity agenda for the improvement of student achievement.

## **Six Essential Elements of Capacity Building for Principals**

## Equity-Focused Content

In describing equity-centered capacity building for school leaders, we begin with the *content* of the professional learning. We have already discussed *four dimensions of instructional leadership* with key strategies of equity-embedded practices. These kinds of leadership practices must serve as a significant part of the core content for any professional learning designed to focus on equity-centered instructional leadership. Participants need both the knowledge base and leadership skills to:

1. Establish a vision and mission for their school community that every student's success is non-negotiable;
2. Lead for the improvement of instruction, supporting teachers through coaching, professional learning, and professional learning communities;
3. Create a culture of results-focused learning that values racial, linguistic and economic diversity; and
4. Lead an equity agenda — an intentional plan to provide all students the opportunity, access and support to achieve rigorous levels of knowledge and skill that they can apply to real-world experiences.

In addition to having content that focuses on the improvement of instruction by leading with an equity lens, we have found the following five essential characteristics of effective professional learning or capacity building for school leaders.

## Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Leaders and prospective leaders focused upon leading for equity need time for self-reflection. They need to grapple with critical questions about their personal beliefs about teaching and learning and the capacity of *all* students, especially those who are struggling, to master today's rigorous academic expectations and garner the social, emotional and academic skills and competencies to share their gifts and thrive. Leaders also need to reflect on their daily practice and lessons they have learned that they will carry forward in their work. Finally, equity-centered leadership is often met with strong resistance. Leaders sometimes feel very lonely in this work. Self-reflection can sometimes fuel self-renewal, a very necessary process for equity-centered leaders.

## Communities of Practice

Not only do principals need time for self-reflection, we find in our work with school leaders that one of their preferred structures for learning is that of a *community of peers and other educators* who share similar work and have similar goals, experiences and challenges. It is in these communities where leaders learn together. Through dialogue and “consultancy protocols,” they share their most challenging problems of practice and engage in collaborative problem-solving. They engage in inquiry together, using a range of meaningful data and strategic questioning to examine critical issues. Communities of practice also provide a place where leaders can safely deal with the strong emotions that inevitably arise in the work of equity-centered leadership. It is in these communities of practice that principals can share their stories, the impact of the challenges they face upon them personally, emotionally and professionally, and their strategies.

### **Job-Embedded Learning**

Professional learning needs to be job-embedded. It needs to be relevant; it needs to include feedback; and it needs to be able to facilitate a change in principal practice. Principals actually need to be able to take what they learn in their communities of practice back to their school settings and try different strategies, noting successes, challenges and results. They then bring these results back to the group for debrief, analysis, celebration, problem solving and discussion of potential next steps. These practices, especially when coupled with individual coaching, can be very effective in helping leaders go deeper in their learning and changing practice. We often see challenges in working with principals in this way.

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Changing one’s practice is sometimes difficult to do; change can be hard. This process works best when *principals’ supervisors* are closely involved in this

process, consistently providing resources, coaching and support for principals. This means that the principal supervisors must acquire the same level of knowledge and commitment to leading with an equity agenda. They too must understand how to analyze data and work with principals in an inquiry process identifying strengths and the right problems of practice and strategies to address the problems at all levels. In order for principals to be equity-centered leaders, they must have the full support of the central office. *For many central offices, providing this kind of support will require major transformation, beginning with a focus on equity from the district perspective.* We often talk of a necessary “through-line” from the superintendent’s desk to the student’s desk. This through-line is necessary if we are going to see broad-scale change for students across schools and across districts rather than finding just the “pockets of success” that we often see in districts. All students have a right to an education grounded in equity and excellence, no matter what school they find themselves attending.

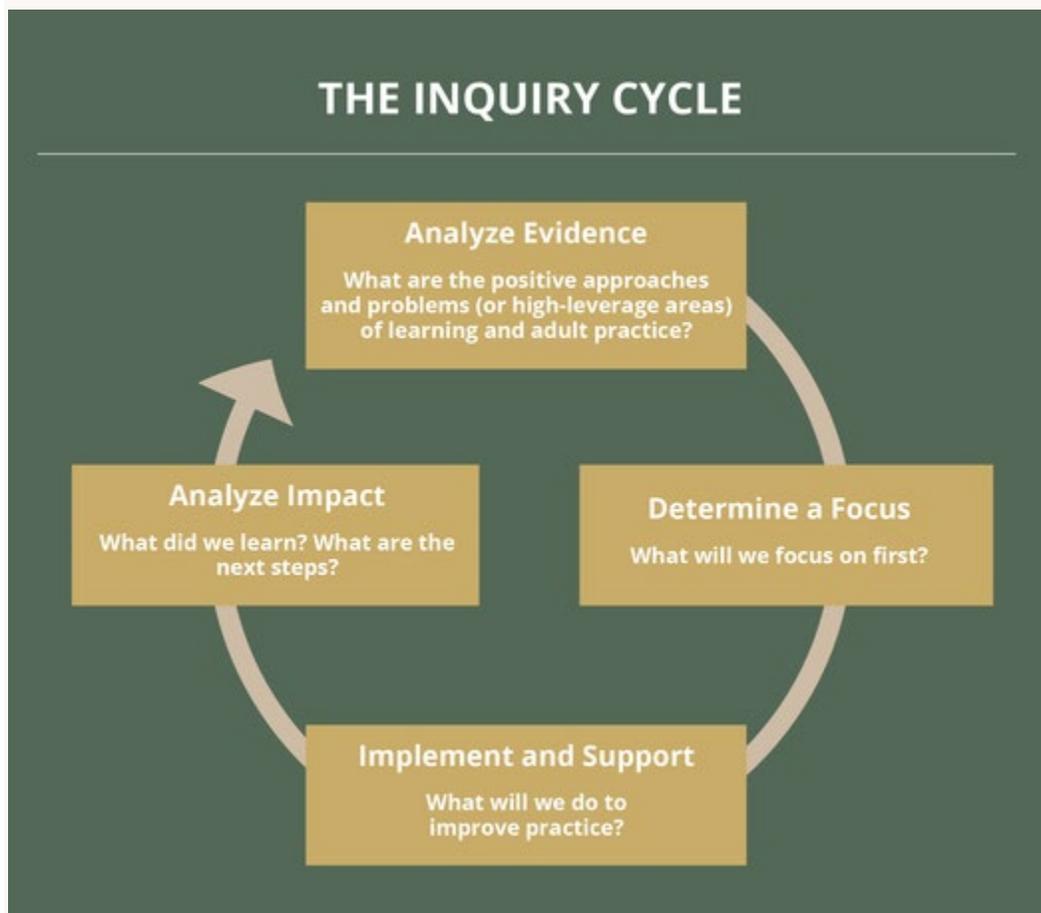
### **Differentiated Support for Principals**

School leaders will, of course, be at different places in their journeys to equity-centered leadership. Professional development providers should therefore give careful consideration to *differentiated support* by creating different structures for the school leaders’ learning and growth. First of all, the whole group structure is quite conducive to presentation, sharing and discussion of research and information. It is also during whole group sessions that leaders can focus on building knowledge and skills, group learning and dialogue. A second viable structure for learning is *one-on-one coaching*. Coaching facilitates differentiation by providing the opportunity for principals to take the knowledge and skills learned in the whole group sessions and focus collaboratively with a coach on their own strengths and areas of focus, and go deeper in their own learning as it applies to their specific needs and context. This coaching protocol is strengthened by the use of qualitative and quantitative, disaggregated student and school performance data, as well as data from classroom observations and student work. Finally, grouping leaders in small groups by area of focus (i.e., creating a learning-focused culture, analyzing disaggregated data, looking at student work, etc.) can serve as another effective strategy for building leaders’ capacity in very specific skill areas and differentiating support.

### **The Use of Inquiry**

Finally, one of the most important processes we can use in capacity-building work, and that principals can use in the work of improving instructional

practice, is *inquiry*. Inquiry is a process through which leaders can study their own leadership practices as well as teaching and learning in their schools. Initially, some may think inquiry is similar to, if not the same as, reflection. While it is true that inquiry includes reflection, in and of itself, inquiry is much more than reflection. It is a process that requires participants to analyze a range of data, ask reflective questions, identify strengths, try out potential strategies for problems of practice, analyze the impact of the strategies and make data-informed decisions about next steps. The chart below depicts four phases of the inquiry process:



The use of inquiry is an essential skill for leaders committed to equity-centered leadership. It is a process by which principals, teachers, school supervisors, superintendents, students and others analyze multiple sources of disaggregated data. Then, they use the results to ask critical questions such as the following: *What are the patterns of achievement among our students? Which students are doing well? Why? How will this particular initiative help the low-performing students? Who is taking honors courses? Who is in special education? Who is caught in-between systems and supports? Why? Are we hearing student voices about their learning experience in our school? What*

*are the methods we're using to hear and be in dialogue with students? Are they deep enough or authentic? How does behavior impact learning? Who is being suspended? For what reasons? What teachers are being successful with which students, within which disciplines? Why?*

Inquiry helps leaders (in many fields) identify successes and problems, name inequities, determine solutions, leverage strengths, implement strategies, use data to determine impact and then identify next steps. It is a process essential to improving instruction as well as building the capacity of principals and other school leaders to be data-driven and equity-centered in their work. Regular inquiry practice can help build an equity-centered community where educators can collectively investigate their greatest strengths and challenges and pursue solutions to student problems of learning and teaching and leadership problems of practice.

In order for this process to be successful, leaders must first of all use multiple sources of both qualitative and quantitative, disaggregated data to get as full a picture as possible of student learning, instruction and leadership. Then, realizing the plethora of challenges and opportunities facing schools, a driving question for example, might be, *"Which student problem of learning, if solved, would yield the greatest benefit across grade levels and disciplines?"* Or, one could flip this question to investigate, *"Where are students with the greatest barriers succeeding and thriving in ways that far exceed their peers in other schools? Why is this the case, and how might we leverage across classrooms and schools the strategies being engaged with these students?"* Finally, leaders need skill and courage in the analysis of data, and they must be willing to accept the fact that data will often tell us things we do not particularly want to hear.

Many school leaders are working very hard to ensure that each and every student — regardless of ethnicity, zip code, socioeconomic status, language or gender — engages daily in a rigorous learning experience that results in the highest level of social, emotional and academic success and readiness for college, life and living-wage careers. This is a daunting task and, quite frankly, very difficult to do without school districts also making the same commitment. Part of this district commitment must include the kind of professional learning and coaching that will build the capacity of school leaders to be equity-centered leaders: Those who lead with an equity frame, who are relentless about having the highest quality of instruction and robust supports in every classroom and who have the courage to partner widely and effectively, inside and outside of schools, stand up on behalf of each and every student.

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## About the Author

**June Rimmer**, Associate Director, [Center for Educational Leadership](#), University of Washington

Dr. June Rimmer joined the Central for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington's College of Education in 2011 as an Associate Director. In this role she leads the design and implementation of services for school leaders, and develops and manages district partnerships committed to building leaders' expertise in instructional leadership and transforming central offices. Prior to joining the CEL team, she served as a program director with the Stupski Foundation in San Francisco, coaching and providing technical assistance to urban district leaders committed to reform. In addition she was part of a research team examining powerful student learning experiences that lead to 21st century skills and competence as well the system-level changes needed at both the district and state levels to support 21st century learning.

Over the years, June has served in numerous leadership roles in urban education settings most recently as Chief Academic Officer in Seattle. Prior to working in Seattle, June worked in her hometown of Indianapolis, IN as a high school teacher and principal, as well as in numerous roles at the central office including multicultural education, professional development, assistant to the superintendent, and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction. June's professional interests lie in the design of equity-based instructional systems and building expertise in educators' practice to ensure that all students, particularly our most vulnerable children, exit our systems able to thrive in our dynamic, interconnected, global community.