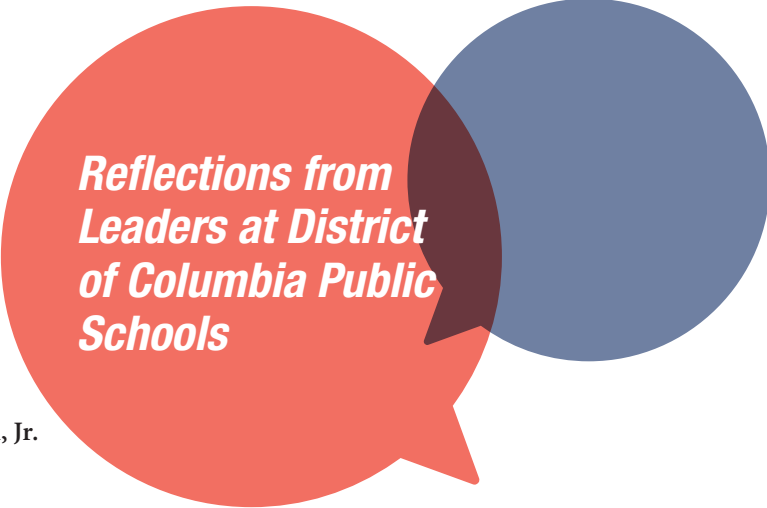# How Districts Can Create the Conditions for Sustainable Change

Reflections from Leaders at District of Columbia Public Schools

Ximena A. Portilla, Michael Lamb, and Kevin Thaddeus Brown, Jr.
October 2021

This product is part of a series of practitioner briefs highlighting ways that education leaders can increase educational equity by building supportive learning environments that will meet all students' social and emotional needs. MDRC, The Alliance for Education Excellence, and The Education Trust recently released a brief that summarizes lessons from the field about how to engage in this type of systems-level change.[1] To provide district leaders and practitioners with more insights, this product shares the experiences of one district, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), that has been working on this effort for approximately the past five years.

This conversation provides a window into the system-level thinking that was necessary for DCPS to engage in to create an equity-focused framework for its district. It highlights why DCPS began to integrate the science of learning and human development with its existing focus on equity, specifically, brain research that highlights how children's social and emotional well-being is inextricably linked to their ability to engage and learn; why DCPS focused on building the capabilities of all adults through district-wide training; and how DCPS is reexamining its district policies in light of its equity goals. These reflections are not a step-by-step guide for other districts to adopt, but rather are shared to inform leaders across the U.S. public education system how one district approached addressing equity in schools: how DCPS reimagined what is possible to serve the needs of all its students, staff members, and communities.

We thank the following leaders for their insights:

- Dr. Melissa Kim, Deputy Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools

- Dr. Angela Chapman, Chief Transformation and Leadership Officer, Columbus City Schools (*Formerly Chief of Elementary Schools, District of Columbia Public Schools*)

Why do you think there is a need to reimagine what schooling is like for students? ▶

KIM: The promise of what public education can be is such a beautiful thing in America. But what we do in practice is perpetuate the very opposite. Our systems, policies, mechanisms, and structures—the cogs in the wheels in public education—actually do the opposite of what we tell our kids and families that it will do. We say that public education is going to be the great equalizer ... it will give you all the opportunities to move forward with your lives and achieve your dreams. And those are the things that we *say*, but in actuality, the structure of our education system is created to actually divide our kids and sort them. Some of our kids are set up to win with baked-in structural priorities and advantages. And some of our kids are being divided and sorted to develop an identity of themselves that says, "You don't belong, you aren't good enough, something is wrong with you— something innate to you is the reason why you are not going to succeed." From my perspective, we have to do things differently because it's simply the right thing to do so that we don't perpetuate this racist pattern that is built to harm so many of our kids.

CHAPMAN: [Many of the students we were not reaching] were coming to school with a lot of emotional baggage and trauma from their neighborhood. There was a lot of violence in the community. While [teachers] had a lot of great resources to teach the curriculum, there were lots of missed opportunities because students weren't ready to engage in the academic content due to the emotional baggage and trauma they carried in their invisible "backpacks." Students would come to school and share those experiences with their teachers and the teachers didn't have tools readily available in their toolbox; staff had very little training on how to best support students where they were.

Why do you think districts need to reinvent themselves using a system-wide perspective? ▶

KIM: There are lots of great bright spots of school leaders and educators who get [how to create supportive learning environments for all students]; it is completely clear in their mind and thus in their practice. And what that looks like is different [for each], as it should be specific to the individual and the context. But the constant in these leaders is that they have a clear vision about what they want and they are clear in how to align the systems and structures in that school so that vision is well connected to every choice, action, and interaction.

What I have not yet found is a system of schools where every single school is delivering this for kids and adults. All of our school systems have some numbers of educators and leaders who are anchored in the belief that kids are inherently good, and the role of the adult is to nurture and build strong student identities, not break them down. But it simply isn't acceptable to have some children luck into that right school and leave others in schools where their identity development isn't tended to. For example, if we know that a particular reading curriculum is far superior to others, why would we only allow some students and teachers to access it? Why would we spend resources on something much less effective? In the same vein, if we know that educators should be both content and human development experts to better support student success, we need to make that systematic so that all students have access [to educators with that training and expertise].

How do you create the space to have these conversations about equity in your district? ▶

KIM: In the beginning, when we started talking about equity and more specifically creating a new path forward as an antiracist school district, it started with just conversations and building the groundswell. It was me as deputy chancellor with the positional power and privilege of the role, saying it to myself, then to the people I work with all the time—the superintendents and chiefs of our school district—that unless we talk about the intersection of race, equity, and excellence at every single meeting and ground this into every decision we make, it is wasted time and wasted opportunity. We brought the dialogue into all meeting spaces and then it hit a tipping point such that it was happening in many conversations and many spaces with many people; people were thinking about it and talking about it and shifting actions because of it. It was becoming more normed and through those conversations we began to create common language.

For district leaders who are just getting started on their systemic work, I say get ready, because if you do it right, there's a tipping point when enough people are "in it" and it's on their conscious and unconscious minds. We have made it more comfortable for teachers and their leaders to talk about race, bias, and equity. And I hope we will soon be at a point where our teachers are discussing this more with our students and their families.

How did your teaching staff react to the professional development training in the science of learning and how to support students' social and emotional well-being? ▶

CHAPMAN: At the time, DCPS offered [academic] professional development to teachers that was primarily centered around the [academic] curriculum. It was centered on academic standards that emphasized what we want our students to know and be able to do as it related to grade-level expectations, and that left a lot of teachers yearning for how to really connect with their students. When we started training [with Turnaround for Children] that focused on the science of learning and human development,[2] it really spoke to staff because it finally acknowledged that all our students bring their [whole selves] into the classroom. These trainings provided an understanding of how to meet them where they are at. We found that when we supported our teachers and gave them these resources that they needed in their professional development, the students were so responsive that even their families were responsive to the resources. The greatest reward is that our students are much more engaged; they are relaxed and ready to learn. Student achievement started to improve, and we saw glimmers of hope and we were really convinced that this was a recipe for success. This is the type of support we need to offer all of our students and all of our staff.

Why did you feel it was important to provide this type of training to all district staff members, not just your teaching staff? ▶

CHAPMAN: It was very important for us to provide training to our senior-level leaders—our principal supervisors, who are called instructional superintendents. We needed to make sure that they were grounded and rooted in the research so they knew how to support their principals. We were intentional about previewing the content for them before the principals would see the content, so they could also help us lead the conversation together so that there was a seamless partnership.

Because our chancellor, deputy chancellors, chiefs, and superintendents were advocating for this work, it was easier for us to get buy-in throughout the chain of command; having the district leaders' support meant that principals and teachers had to pay attention. Principals needed to see that this was a joint effort across all levels; we also involved the equity team and the social-emotional learning team since there was a considerable amount of overlap. The more we involved various cross-office teams in the trainings, there was more energy within the district, and everyone wanted to participate in the trainings. The work itself and the feedback from teachers created a buzz and synergy that created a passion. There was rarely a case where we had to worry about buy-in.

As other districts consider training and professional development in this area, they need to include all stakeholders in their [district's] organizational chart to ensure that the work is embedded and permeated throughout the organization.

Did staff members feel a tension between your district's accountability standards and emphasizing students' social and emotional well-being?

CHAPMAN: At the time we started this work, DCPS was laser-focused on accountability. This was the culture at the district central office [and] for the principals, in particular, it was very high stakes for them to meet their academic achievement benchmarks. The perception was that students come to school and somehow, you need to bring them up to the grade-level standard without acknowledging the challenges that they experience outside of school.

The trainings provided a way for staff to contextualize the adverse experiences that our students were having at home and equip staff with practical strategies so they could mitigate and serve as a buffer to those adverse effects the students were having. It was an a-ha moment that we could do this. Yes, we know that the academic standards are high. We're going to continue to push for rigorous expectations and that our students master the standards. But we need to attend to the whole needs of the whole child, not just the academic rigor piece.

What is some advice for district leaders looking to integrate staff training on the science of learning into their greater vision to improve equity in schools?

KIM: For district leaders trying to do this—whether a big or small school district—know that you don't need to invent all this on your own. There are scientists and researchers who have already codified the science of learning into tools and resources to put into practice. For us, partnering with Turnaround for Children was key because at the time, I was trying to figure out what our framework was going to be. So we leaned on them as a partner, and it helped us grow things exponentially. That is a much better use of your time as a district leader than making stuff up on your own. I would also reiterate that you need to engage [everyone throughout the district], and then engage some more. People power this work, and our people need to be part of this work.

How did you increase trust and engagement with families and students in the community who have previously been disconnected, to help cultivate a new vision? ▶

KIM: We very openly stated that parents must be our partners in this effort. In order for us to do this work, we have to develop our educators so they can be human development experts and sit alongside kids and parents. Instead of seeing parents as annoyances or not valuable, [parents] must be seen as super-valuable because that is what they are. They are our first and most important partners. We started a bunch of parent community conversations and launched the DCPS parent university series to connect with our parents. We began bridging the divide between the school and the home.

We also began centering the school experience on the students' voice. We do all this work to the kids, but we never talked to them. So now, we talk to the kids about their experiences. You have to let them drive this because it's their realities and their perceptions that really matter. We survey students on whether they feel loved, challenged, and prepared. They provide that direct feedback to their schools.

How is your district aligning its current policies and practices to ensure that they pursue equity? ▶

KIM: If you have a policy that reflects antiquated beliefs, you end up with outcomes you don't want. All organizations have a lot of policies and many are broken. Many policies clash with each other and leave leaders trying to figure out what they mean. When you have an organization that has been around as long as many school districts have been around, and there have been lots of leadership transitions and political influences, most of your audience is dealing with a mess of policies that they have inherited. Some of those policies they can lean on, and some they can completely disregard. It's so easy to write a policy and ask staff to comply. But the system has to be grounded in a belief that matches the desired outcome.

Therefore, our policy team has created a policy that requires the district to ask itself, "Who does this policy hurt? Who does it help?" So, in writing new policy, we are required to have a conversation to think through all the potential outcomes of implementing a new policy. This process may slow things down some but that intentionality brings more people and conversations to the table so that our policies are reflective of our commitment to equity and excellence for students.

What final recommendations do you have for district leaders who are beginning this journey of district transformation? ▶

KIM: Just have the conversation. Create the space in your organization to discuss vision setting and why we gather every single day at school. Ask yourselves, "What is your reason for choosing this job? And no matter what obstacle, why do you keep at it?" This gets people talking about their stories and what brought them to become educators, but also unites us in the toughest of circumstances and paints a vision for what we believe is possible. You need to put stakes in the ground and find out who is with you and who is distant from you and why that gap exists. That helps to build a better understanding of the people who power this work.

And stick with it. We could use the COVID-19 pandemic, we could use a budget cut, we could use lots of different reasons to explain why you put something to the side. It's so easy to be distracted and so easy to get pulled into something else. Instead, anchor to a "*no matter what*" mentality—an unwavering focus and drive for equity—that is what I would talk to organizations and leaders about.

NOTES

1   Ximena A. Portilla, Michael Lamb, and Kevin Thaddeus Brown, Jr., "Ideas from Experts on How Districts Can Create the Conditions for Sustainable Change: Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being" (New York: MDRC, 2021).

2   To learn more about Turnaround for Children, see: https://turnaroundusa.org