Addressing Inequity with the Power of Collective Efficacy

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Five intentional leadership practices can help teacher teams work together— better—to confront inequities.

Maine Township Superintendent Ken Wallace faced a dilemma: His Cook County, Illinois, district of three high schools was experiencing a rapidly changing student population, and educators were clinging to outdated teaching approaches. One impediment to student success was limited access to enriched programs; pathways to advanced placement courses were not being accessed by all. Ken reflected: We weren't meeting the needs of all our students. Our most challenging courses, too often, weren't available to our traditionally underserved students, a population that has been our fastest growing. It would have been easier to maintain the status quo— however, identifying the inequity and bringing it out in the open was a necessity.

Awareness—and Confidence
Identifying achievement problems is essential to improving outcomes for all students. But educators must also perceive themselves to be *capable* of meeting the needs of underperforming and/or disadvantaged students in ways that result in students' better performance. In other words, they must have high expectations—of students and themselves. But the stronger educators' perceptions of the obstacles posed by students' socioeconomic status—or of correlations between students' race or ethnicity and lower school achievement—the lower educators' expectations and goals tend to be (Evans, 2009).

Lower expectations result in teachers assigning low-level tasks to students; this lowers students' own expectations about themselves. This diminished sense of efficacy results in students having a lack of willingness to take risks and apply new approaches.

When low achievement is pervasive in a school, teachers can also start to feel *they* have less efficacy—individually and collectively. *Collective teacher efficacy* refers to a faculty's shared belief that through their collective action they can positively influence student outcomes. A faculty's lack of collective efficacy results in joint resignation and maintenance of the status quo. So if we want to realize equity in education, we've got to develop individual and collective efficacy in schools.

The Fruits of Collective Efficacy—and Cultivating Them
Research demonstrates that schools in which there is a firmly established sense of collective efficacy have higher student achievement (Hattie, 2019). For teachers, collective efficacy results in greater persistence, increased motivation, and the sustained effort required to implement evidence-based practices that support student learning (Donohoo & Katz, 2020). Goddard, Skrla, and Salloum (2017) demonstrated that collective teacher efficacy not only fosters higher overall achievement, but also reduces achievement gaps.
Bandura (1977) identified four "sources of information" that promote collective efficacy:
- *Mastery experiences* (the most powerful one): Through a successful performance, teams connect their combined efforts to positive outcomes.
- *Vicarious experiences*: Teachers observe their colleagues' accomplishments, sparking a belief that they could be successful too.
- *Social persuasion*: Credible colleagues provide one another encouragement, guidance, and support.
- *Affective states*: These sources involve emotional reactions. Positive emotions support teams' willingness to tackle difficult challenges. When teams successfully regulate their responses to negative emotions, they strengthen their resilience.

A Key Step: Fostering Reflective Practices
So how can leaders cultivate these sources and strengthen collective efficacy? One way is by embedding reflective practices into educators' ongoing work. Reflective practices involve teachers thinking *evaluatively* about their professional work with the intention of improving it. The acronym CLEAR highlights important aspects of reflective practice:
- **C**ollaborate to examine aggregated and disaggregated student learning data. (What is our area ofgreatest need? What are student strengths? Are we meeting the needs of all our students? Which are underserved?)
- **L**everage evidence-based approaches. (What should work in theory? What has worked for others in similar situations and contexts?)
- **E**xperiment with evidence-based strategies in classrooms. (How can we best implement evidence-based approaches, given our unique context and students?)
- **A**ssess impact. (What is my individual impact? Our collective impact? Are we making progress toward our goals and closing achievement gaps?)

- **R**e-examine evidence. (What is the evidence telling us to do now? What do we need to start, stop, and continue?)

When educators engage in reflective practices, they usually uncover beliefs and assumptions that drive their actions. This shifts attributions for success or failure to causes within teachers' influence, making the cause-and-effect relationship (teaching causes learning) more apparent. Efficacy beliefs are enhanced as a result. Raising teachers' expectations and increasing teachers' sense of individual and collective efficacy is complex work. However, leaders *can* create environments where embedded reflective practices are integral to teachers' interdependent work, reaping the benefits of increased efficacy and higher expectations about what certain students can and cannot accomplish. Five intentional leadership practices support embedded reflective practices.

1. Engage Staff in Analyzing Data
Student achievement data is often reported in an aggregated form representing entire populations (percentage graduating, credit accumulation, cohorts, etc.). However, this can conceal important differences between groups of students. It's not until data is disaggregated—breaking population information down into smaller groupings based on characteristics like family income, English language proficiency, race, or ethnicity—that implications for subgroups of students are uncovered. System and school leaders usually determine what data gets shared and with whom. They also determine what information will be used (or omitted) and how that information is going to be used, and they need to make those decisions very wisely.

At Maine Township, Superintendent Wallace and Jill Geocaris, the district's director of adult learning, brought teacher teams together to analyze and interpret aggregated and disaggregated data. They compiled and displayed data that demonstrated Maine Township's changing demographics: Between 2002 and 2017, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch more than doubled. More students were attending the school from single-parent homes and families with incomes. As teacher teams examined pathway data, they determined that minority students weren't accessing advanced placement courses.

Ken and Jill encouraged teams to intersect multiple sources of evidence, such as the four types of data that can be used for school improvement identified by Victoria Bernhardt (1998). These are *demographic data* (descriptive information about the students and community); *student learning data* (standardized tests, everyday assessments, credit accumulation, and the like); *perceptual data* (what students, parents, and teachers think about the learning environment); and *school process data* (what teachers are doing to get particular results, like unpacking standards or using gap-closing interventions).

As the Maine Township teachers did, teams might explore questions like, Do students from different ethnicities perceive the learning environment differently, and

is their grading consistent with these perceptions (demographic data by perceptual data by student learning data)? What instructional strategies did English language learners enjoy most in content-area classroom this year (demographic data by school process data by perceptual data)?

By engaging teachers in interpreting disaggregated data, Ken and Jill helped to create urgency among the staff to figure out ways to address these newly uncovered inequities. Understanding the importance of collective efficacy, Ken conveyed his certainty in their capacity to improve outcomes for *all* students, despite evidence of past performance and commonly held notions about race, class, and achievement. The staff set a goal of creating more access to enriched courses for underserved students.

2. Lead Discussions that Leverage Evidence-Based Approaches
The next step was for Maine Township staff to turn their attention to evidence-based approaches. School staff encouraged underserved students to take high-level courses like Advanced Placement, almost doubling their non-white, non-Asian enrollment in these classes between 2008 and 2019. But the leadership team quickly realized that access alone wouldn't be sufficient, particularly for students with little experience in rigorous courses. As students new to high-level courses began taking them, these educators believed they would benefit from cooperative learning experiences. They hoped cooperative learning would present an alternative to competitive activities and traditional teacher-centered practices, providing an opportunity for students of different ethnic backgrounds to learn together.

The origins of cooperative learning can be traced back to U.S. schools during the 1960s. Implementing cooperative learning in classrooms was a response to interracial conflict resulting from desegregation. Research demonstrated that involving students in activities that required the exchange of information and that were based on positive interdependence and individual accountability significantly reduced interracial conflict and absenteeism and increased student engagement and performance (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979).

3. Encourage Experimentation with Evidence-Based Strategies
To shift instruction, the district used a train-the-trainer model to embed cooperative learning in every classroom. As educators experimented and then assessed changes in instruction, they noticed that most of the successful uses of cooperative strategies were happening in the trainer's classrooms, not the trainees. Uncovering this implementation gap helped the leadership team recognize that it was important to not only foster experimentation with evidence-based practices, but also to monitor whether teachers were *using* those practices.

Careful monitoring of teachers' use of cooperative learning strategies uncovered a need for more intensive teacher support. The district began to use job-embedded coaching, shifting away from their original train-the-trainer model.
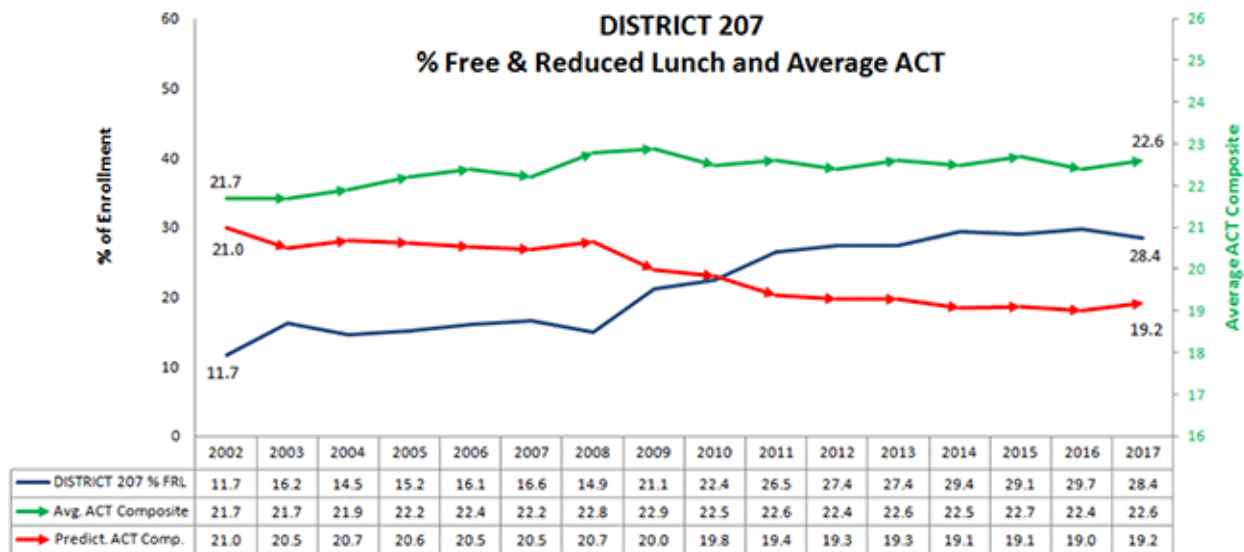
4. Assess Impact Through Self-Evaluation

Jill Geocaris documented—and shared widely—evidence of improved student learning experiences in Maine Township schools. For instance, Jill noted that before implementing coaching for cooperative learning, every time she walked into a classroom the focal point was the front of the room. But that had changed:

When an adult opened the door to visit the class, every student used to swivel their head to see who had entered. It's completely different now: when I walk into a class, no one even looks up. The students are so engaged in what they are learning and discussing together—they don't even notice when I enter the room!

Such perceptions were evidence that teacher experimentation had impacted learning to the extent that the entire student experience shifted. In addition, teachers recognized that what they were doing made a difference to students. Collective efficacy increased as a result.

Maine Township also realized significant increases in overall student achievement. From 2008 to 2020, total enrollment in accelerated, dual credit, or advanced placement courses almost doubled. Maine Township students outperformed predicted ACT university entrance exam composite scores (Figure 1). Given that ACT composite scores are typically 23.6 for higher-income students and 19.5 for lower-income ones, this represents a powerful closing of the income achievement gap (Mattern, Radunzel, & Harmston, 2016).

Figure 1. Maine Township Percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch and Average ACT Score

DISTRICT 207
% Free & Reduced Lunch and Average ACT

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
DISTRICT 207 % FRL	11.7	16.2	14.5	15.2	16.1	16.6	14.9	21.1	22.4	26.5	27.4	27.4	29.4	29.1	29.7	28.4
Avg. ACT Composite	21.7	21.7	21.9	22.2	22.4	22.2	22.8	22.9	22.5	22.6	22.4	22.6	22.5	22.7	22.4	22.6
Predict. ACT Comp.	21.0	20.5	20.7	20.6	20.5	20.5	20.7	20.0	19.8	19.4	19.3	19.3	19.1	19.1	19.0	19.2

The leadership team continued to keep data at the forefront and frequently encouraged staff to evaluate progress toward their goal of increasing enrollment in

enriched programs for underserved students. The combination of enrollment data and increasing ACT scores confirmed that their actions had the desired impact—a mastery experience for these educators.

5. Re-examining Evidence and Challenge Assumptions

As school staff continued their journey of evidence-based reflection, monitoring their progress on bringing all students into advanced courses allowed them to change their approach along the way when needed. At one point, they collectively identified that improvement would not result with a focus solely on instruction and student learning; there was a critical need to change *educator* beliefs.

Re-examining evidence helped educators challenge their past assumptions, which included notions about the traditional culture of schooling and the premise that race, ethnicity, and zip codes were better predictors of student success than the collective efforts of educators. Educators' resistance diminished as concrete evidence revealed that previously underserved students were capable of high levels of learning and steadily increasing achievement. They began interpreting success through a growth mindset and attributing improvements to their combined efforts, which was essential to strengthening efficacy beliefs.

As a result, educators stopped overlooking the needs of underserved populations and started committing to addressing them. They also stopped working in isolation and started to value learning collectively. Instead of focusing on why they believed equity could not be achieved, they believed in their collective resolve to make it happen.

Tapping the Source

The embedded reflective practices described here helped Maine Township's educators tap into sources of efficacy. Collaboration influenced how teachers interpreted mastery and made it visible when teachers were successful. Engaging in interdependent work, guided by the CLEAR cycle, educators developed a deep understanding of the whole staff's collective contribution to their individual success.

By interacting with and gaining more intimate knowledge of each other's practices, teachers enhanced their own effectiveness through vicarious experiences. There was greater faculty cohesion. The CLEAR cycle also helped to create environments that legitimized help-seeking and peer support. As educators felt more supported, they felt less stress and anxiety, thus reducing the effects of negative emotions that diminish efficacy.

Teachers' theories about students' socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity affect the content and skills they choose to teach, their beliefs about students' ability to learn, as well their beliefs about what they can do to increase student performance (Evans, 2009). By harnessing the power of collective teacher efficacy—including embedding reflective practices into teachers' group work—schools can confront issues of inequity and raise the achievement of all students.

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