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BELONGING and INCLUSION in IDENTITY SAFE SCHOOLS
A Guide for Educational Leaders

CORWIN

Thank you

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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools*, by Becki Cohn-Vargas, Alexandrea Creer Kahn, Amy Epstein, Kathe Gogolewski.

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Foreword

I was introduced to the term *identity safety* approximately 10 years ago while in conversation with one of my son's elementary school teachers. In this particular parent–teacher conference, we discussed possible teachers for my son's upcoming academic year and the criteria by which students were grouped in classes and matched with teachers. Among criteria shared, the teacher described a practice of placing similarly identifying students together in classes for the purpose of identity safety, and she wondered what my thoughts were about my son being intentionally placed in a class with the one other Black student in his grade level; although diverse in other ways, this elementary school was home to few Black students and families. We discussed this idea and the teacher shared the ways in which the school worked to leverage the idea of identity safety to support student belonging and inclusion.

At the time of this conversation, salient were a few identities of my own; not only was I showing up as a Black parent of a Black child in a largely non-Black school space, but I was also a teacher educator and emerging scholar whose work focused on the intersection of K–12 school contexts and identity development. Therefore, I brought with me a level of criticality and complexity to our discussion that day, while I also experienced a school considering identity safety and how they might begin to promote a safe learning environment for racially minoritized students.

What we do know is that school contexts matter in how students come to see themselves and the regard young people feel from others in school spaces. We also know that strong, highly regarded identities are associated with positive school experiences, academic success, and other school-related social and psychological outcomes. Therefore, each day schools have the opportunity to be places where diverse ways of being are not only present but valued and meaningfully integrated into the fabric and culture of what it means to do school. Schools can be intentional spaces that nurture the whole child—where school adults are a source of care and positive regard; where the curriculum is culturally relevant, sustaining, and inclusive; and where the structures, policies, and practices enhance rather than

threaten cultural and historical ways of being. They can be places of psychological safety and opportune environments in which to learn and to thrive.

Since the day I was introduced to identity safety 10 years ago, much work has been done on how identity safe practices look in TK–12 classrooms. The most recent book in a three-part series, *Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools: A Guide for Leaders*, builds on the authors' previous TK–12 classroom-focused identity safety work to create a guide for school leaders looking to learn about, and engage in, practices that support the development of identity safe school spaces. In the pages that follow, you will not only find references to educational and school leadership research but also professional experiences shared to ground the reader in how all educational leaders can engender a sense of belonging in service of student learning. During such a pivotal moment in our society and in the field, how fabulous that such experienced, deeply thoughtful scholar-practitioners are doing this work.

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Prologue

Movements Creating Change

While the time for cultural transformation in schools is overdue, the time for change is ripe. The attention from movements such as Black Lives Matter, the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, followed by the largest protests in U.S. history have given us a raw view of the deep foundation and entrenchment of white supremacy within the police force and other institutions in this country. More people are now looking deeply at systemic racism. In concert with the Black Lives Matter movement, new and diverse voices have arisen to counter bigotry in support of racial equity. The protests, which include people from all backgrounds and walks of life, have filled the newsrooms and social media. We need to ensure this moment is not just a flash point that will fade in time. The goal is to realize meaningful conversations about race, to see them continue and lead to sustained change, especially among White people who may have little to no experience discussing race with each other or with people of color (Aaronson, 2020).

Listening to voices of Black and Brown and Indigenous people is an important and necessary first step. These movements are turning heads and changing outlooks across the United States. Cities and organizations are realigning their policies to support people of color. In the wake of George Floyd's killing, Interfaith Community Services (2020) in San Diego launched a Multi-City Racial Reconciliation Coalition stating that racial injustice is at the root of their work to address poverty, housing, health, employment, and education as well as all forms of racial injustice. In July 2020, mayors of 27 large and small cities across the United States wrote an op-ed about efforts to unravel "a long history of systemic racism and fighting for long-overdue equity for people of color—and Black people in particular" (Walsh et al., 2020).

Social justice activists, along with many leaders and educators, have been working for years to make substantive changes that shift not only attitudes and behaviors but the relations of power that prop up white supremacy. It is incumbent on us to "seize the time" and look deep into educational systems to halt the devastating

pipeline to prison that has come to be seen as normal and inevitable by so many. It falls on everyone to disrupt patterns of inequity and "othering" with meaningful and sustainable changes.

The Pandemic: Panic and Opportunity

Behind these movements, and fueling them with a fierce intensity, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exploded into our lives and schools like a surprise volcanic eruption. The heat was felt everywhere, scattering our efforts and wreaking havoc upon our routines, while at the same time casting a glaring spotlight upon those conditions that disparage, exclude, and diminish opportunities for poor students and students of color. The pandemic also exposed the inequities that keep economically and digitally endowed families and students immune to more severe effects upon their education, health, and well-being. While COVID-19 shed light on these conditions, the effects of privilege for some and disadvantage for others have prevailed in the educational system in many subtle and overt ways, long before the virus hit.

Particularly for students living without health care, access to technology, and other resources, not to mention safe and healthy living conditions, the virus has exacerbated the disparities. These disadvantages have created a debilitating effect on performance, opportunity, and social and emotional well-being for the most vulnerable students. This downward spiral can easily damage the academic performance of all participants in the school, including students and staff. Stress, like all feelings, can be catching—especially among youth. To address this, in essence, is to uplift an entire school community, creating a culture that welcomes all members and supports them in their well-being and best efforts.

The pandemic has helped the nation awaken with a wider lens to the racial injustices and power imbalances present since the inception of our country, explicitly as a result of a cultural white monopoly guiding policies and attitudes. These same mindsets seen undermining equity can now be addressed within the schools in depth. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, more White people have come to recognize that the real struggles endured by students of color have been hidden from view through a practice of colorblindness in the classroom that seeks to erase differences.

As educators, we work to investigate and root out structural inequities as well as challenge our inner realms of prejudice, implicit bias, and cultural blindness. We have the responsibility and opportunity to transform policies, relationships, and ourselves so that all students—including those facing entrenched inequities—are seen, valued, and supported to their fullest potential.

Renowned professor and author Linda Darling-Hammond (Darling-Hammond & George, 2020, para. 13) and colleagues pose a direct challenge to all educators. "Addressing inequality should not be an academic exercise or an isolated performative act—we who believe in educational justice must commit to the long-game of dismantling and replacing practices that have reproduced educational inequality over time. Just as high school sophomore Barbara Rose Johns waged a student walkout that culminated in a legal battle that would become *Brown v. Board of Education*, we must also act with courage to upend inequity in education. . . . How will each of us contribute to racial justice and educational equity now?"

Groundwork for a Better Future

With compassion and deference to the suffering created from the pandemic, COVID-19 nevertheless quietly portends an unprecedented opportunity bearing the capacity to transform our broken schools, because it has, in essence, cleared the stage for reconstruction. The tools for teaching and administering school operations have been leveled to an unknown status as educators grapple with the challenges of online learning, stripped of their former safeguards that were available in face-to-face interactions.

John King (2020), former Secretary of Education, recently suggested we make this a "new deal moment." We can take what we have learned in the pandemic and truly invest in schools where we highlight relationships and draw on students' identities. We can promote well-being and social and emotional learning as a portal for collaborative academic learning. If standardized testing is replaced by categories of proficiency with yearly learning capstones, if punitive discipline is replaced with restorative practices, and if the models of community schools are expanded with wrap-around services, we will realize a track for healing our schools.

It is up to each individual to make this more than a moment of heightened awareness and action. The opportunity to rebuild from scratch offers a unique level of freedom to choose differently. Schools are poised as important social interventions to leverage power and privilege into tools shared by all students, teachers, staff, and families. With that in mind, this book offers a systemic approach to implementing identity safe schools where the academic and emotional welfare of students are the centerpiece of our efforts, where the effects of white supremacy are confronted, and where we offer a pathway forward for our students. Feeling hopeful and encouraged, we ask our readers to join us with Linda Darling-Hammond (Darling-Hammond & George, 2020) when she asks, "How will each of us contribute to racial justice and educational equity now?"