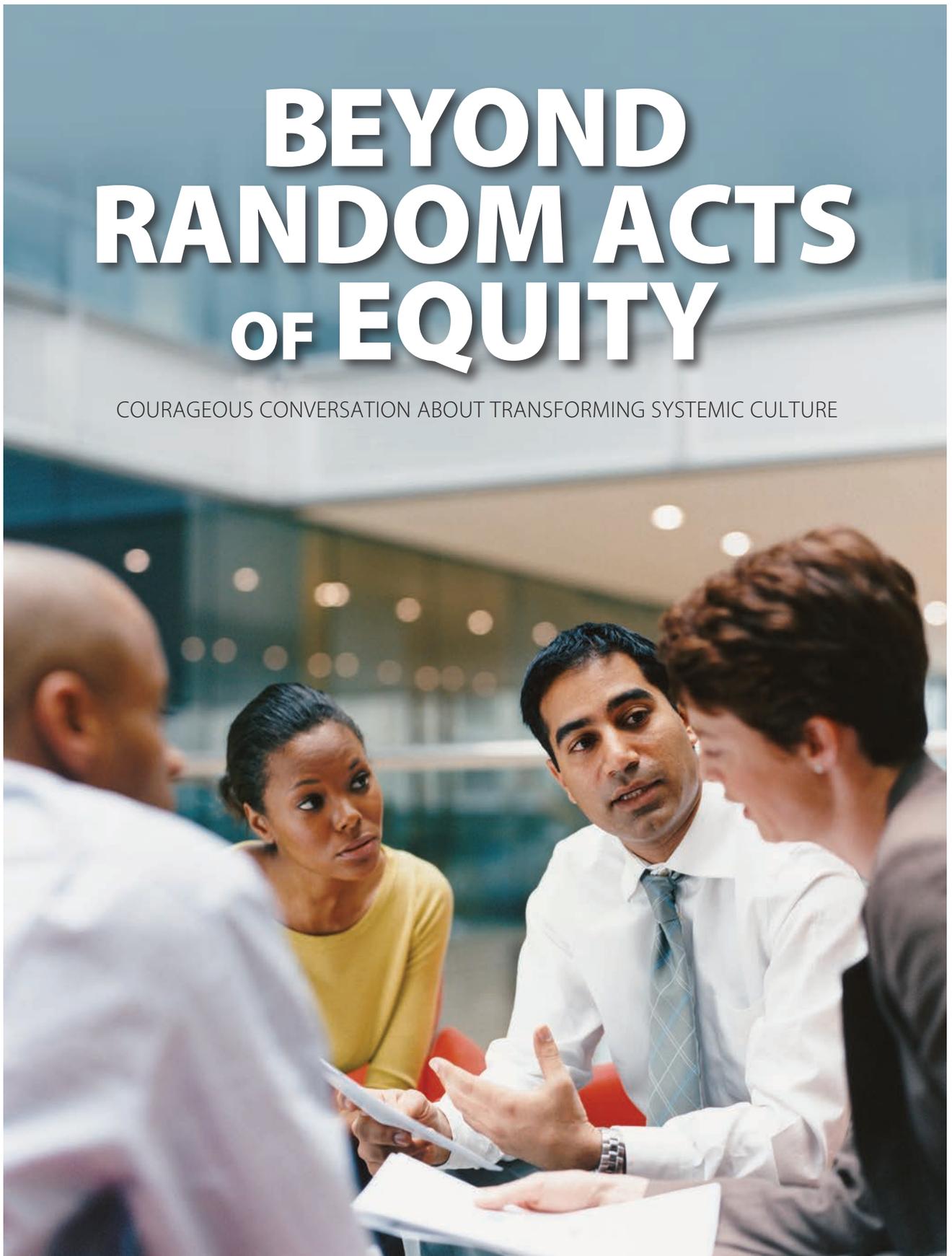


# BEYOND RANDOM ACTS OF EQUITY

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION ABOUT TRANSFORMING SYSTEMIC CULTURE



**Courageous Conversation *engages* those who won't talk, *sustains* the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted, and *deepens* the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions can occur.**

BY GLENN SINGLETON

**S**chools cannot achieve racial equity without explicit processes for leaders and staff to examine their personal, professional, and organizational beliefs about race. But in 25 years of working with schools and organizations in the United States and abroad, I have learned that educational systems are deeply challenged to examine their beliefs about racial equity.

This is especially true when those beliefs have been polished with the superficial and aspirational jargon of mission and vision statements. The language in these statements is revealing. For example, “broadening” — that is, shortening — the term “racial equity” to just “equity” reflects a paucity of knowledge, skill, and will to engage with race.

To systemically transform professional learning to integrate a racial equity lens, we need to address this paucity of dialogue about race. Courageous Conversation is a dialogic approach to doing so. It offers school

systems a protocol and strategy to exercise the passion, practice, and persistence necessary to examine systemic inequity. With these tools, educators can participate in interracial dialogue about race, develop racial understanding, and address racial issues in schools.

Specifically, Courageous Conversation *engages* those who won't talk, *sustains* the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted, and *deepens* the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions can occur.

As schools engage in open and honest dialogue about racial achievement disparities, they can identify and effectively address obstacles to success that exist for all students. As noted leadership and management consultant Margaret Wheatley reminds us, “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change — personal change, community, and organizational change.”



## GOALS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR EQUITY

**P**rofessional learning to foster systemic transformation for equity must address and facilitate practices that teach stakeholders at the board, central office, building, classroom, and community levels to:

- Develop the **SKILL** to talk about race;
- Acquire **KNOWLEDGE** of how race is constructed and understand its intersection with schooling;
- Build the **CAPACITY** to interrogate how systems operate to institutionalize beliefs about race; and
- Summon the **WILL** to interrupt systems that yield unwanted, racially predictable, and disproportionate results.

**LESSONS FROM PARTNER DISTRICTS**

In communities around the country and the world, we work with systemic partners to implement Courageous Conversation. Systemic partners are school districts in which leaders commit to using our tools to develop and use a racial equity lens to facilitate districtwide improvement and strategic planning.

This begins with racial equity professional learning at the executive levels of the district and then strategically moves to scale for schools, educators, families, and communities. The following are two examples of the systemic partners we have worked with.

St. Louis Park Public Schools is a small public school district in a first-tier suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Serving 5,000 students, the district includes four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. We began our systemic partnership with the district in 2014 after conducting introductory racial equity training in the region to address stark racial disparities in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

Fort Worth Independent School District is a larger public school system, serving more than 86,000 students in 83 elementary schools, 29 middle schools and 6th-grade centers, 18 high schools, and 16 other campuses in Fort Worth, Texas. Our partnership with the Fort Worth district started in 2015 under the leadership of the superintendent and the board of education as part of a series of initiatives to redesign, transform, and revitalize the district.

We have learned valuable lessons from these partners and many others as they reflect on their context and engage in professional learning for racial equity. Three lessons in particular stand out about racial equity, identity politics, and cultural transformation in schools:

1. Race matters.
2. Leadership must lead.
3. Courageous Conversation is essential.

Here we illustrate each through the examples of St. Louis Park and Fort Worth.

**Race matters.**

The United States’ unfortunate history of racism, as well as current racial disparities across every sector of society, point to a truth: Race matters. It matters in our beliefs about what every child should know and be able to do; our choices about how to structure and facilitate that learning; and how we treat one another.

Yet many education policy, programming, and practice guidelines fail to align with this reality. They don’t create opportunities for leaders and teachers to acquire literacy and competence about race, racial impact, and systemic racism.

Although racial equity has emerged as a growing priority, schools struggle mightily to talk about race in a manner that is productive, insightful, and generative.

Some school districts are making progress, however. This progress begins with acknowledging how race matters and is affecting our schools and students.

In St. Louis Park Schools, the work using a racial equity approach began in response to a legal directive to desegregate Minneapolis-area schools. The city of Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota have long been challenged with desegregating schools and effectively serving students of color.

Judicial decisions in several high-profile court cases, including one in 2015, have targeted some specific practices to address those challenges. But according to Superintendent Astein Osei, the results have been far from clear, characterized by “gaps between

the official statements, plans, and actions.” Furthermore, he says, many educators have approached the resulting professional learning as a requirement to check off in order to meet a legal mandate, rather than an opportunity for transformation.

In Fort Worth Independent School District, work toward racial equity began with data, which showed that African-American and second language learners consistently scored far below their white counterparts. The pattern seemed independent of family income — African-American students identified as noneconomically disadvantaged scored lower than disadvantaged white students.

Sherry Breed, chief of equity and excellence for the district, said, “This reality confirmed that it was necessary for us to begin a conversation about race.”

Systemic transformation for racial equity is not merely a statistical exercise or response to external pressures, however. It must be grounded in intentional efforts to create and sustain a culture and climate in which all stakeholders, especially traditionally marginalized black, brown and indigenous employees, students, and communities discover and produce through their most empowered selves. This requires that all stakeholders acknowledge the omnipresent role of race in all aspects of schooling.

**Leadership must lead.**

Systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of school systems and schools. That shift must flow from the highest-ranking leadership to and between staff in all divisions of the district.

Achieving racial equity in education is an unapologetically top-down process. Boards of education, superintendents, and school leadership

executives must take the lead and responsibility for transformation processes in their communities. When they discuss how racial belief and bias yield racial disparities, they authorize the system at large to engage in the same development process to acquire new understanding and translate it into effective practice.

Without true commitment to racial equity work at the leadership level, districts and schools too often engage in “random acts of equity.” These event- and incident-driven piecemeal approaches are generally characterized by cultural day events, isolated book studies, emergency responses to racial incidents, and drive-by professional learning workshops. These activities do not engage educators in sustained and thoughtful understanding of their own status, that of their students, and the impact of race on their daily interactions.

In Fort Worth in 2016, four board trustees took the lead in starting a courageous and systemic approach to racial equity. They created a racial equity committee, comprised of parents, community members, higher education leaders, and central office staff.

The committee’s work to engage the conversation about race subsequently led to the board’s approval of its first racial equity policy in February 2017. It also approved a five-year professional learning plan to examine the district’s beliefs, policies, practices. None of this work would have been possible without committed leadership.

In St. Louis Park, leadership came from a different source. In fact, Superintendent Osei said, “While the school board did not impose any barriers to this kind of professional development, neither was there outright and unquestionable support for racial equity work.”

However, some district leaders

stepped up and assumed responsibility for moving the work forward.

“Although not policymakers, [these leaders] gained influence and built relationships in the district,” Osei said. As a result, they implemented a district leadership team meeting four times a year to work on specific problems.

However, this example also demonstrates the challenge of engaging a critical mass of leaders. Key decision-makers were missing from almost every meeting, according to Osei, and “as a result, there was a disconnect between goals and action plans designed by the district team and the dissemination, discussion, or expectations around those plans once the team returned to the workplace.”

#### **Courageous Conversation is essential.**

Language is at the heart of a system’s culture. Consequently, the way to transform district and school culture is to transform the language that is used. But although racial disparities are often cited as strategic concerns, few people want to discuss race or are able to do so in a multiracial setting.

Given that relatively few school leaders have learned how to talk about race effectively, such a skill set must be honed and introduced into the district lexicon at strategic moments. Having a set of tools or a protocol in this process helps educators navigate the difficult terrain of interracial dialogue. A theory of action or framework is also important to help stakeholders arrive at and effectively act on their newfound understandings.

Although it is transformative in and of itself, simply talking about race effectively is insufficient. Courageous Conversation needs to fit within a larger framework aimed at total district, school, and classroom improvement. The Courageous Conversation framework provides three overlapping domains within which the dialogue

is guided: leadership, learning and teaching, and family/community engagement and empowerment.

“The Courageous Conversation framework for leadership development provided anchors for our district leaders’ beliefs about equity,” Osei said. The framework intentionally invited multiple racial perspectives from stakeholders inside and outside of the strategic plan core team.

Subsequently, the district created its 2016-17 professional learning plan to align with the performance targets for culturally relevant pedagogy and racial consciousness development for all employees.

A key component of the professional learning plans was the initiation of culturally relevant instructional coaching. This Courageous Conversation model to train and empower central office instructional coaches and leaders is a vehicle to take equity to greater scale in schools and districts. The equity-focused peer coaching model develops proficiency in applying the protocol as a central tool for effective facilitation, intervention, and coaching for racial equity.

The development of coaches at the central office level builds capacity and long-term sustainability for school and district equity transformation. Through support in examining their reflections, facilitated by skilled racial equity coaching, St. Louis Park teachers were able to uncover beliefs that guide practice.

Helping teachers understand how beliefs and feelings drive their actions and outcomes is critical in transforming student experience and achievement. This heightened level of consciousness from staff was an important departure from race-neutral and color-blind curriculum and instruction-driven notions about their own efficacy and that of their students of color.

**MAKING CHANGE  
IN THE DISTRICTS**

The Courageous Conversation approach has helped initiate change in St. Louis Park and Fort Worth districts.

Fort Worth leaders have reported the following changes in practice:

- In February 2017, the district adopted its racial equity policy, which states in part: “The responsibility for addressing these disparities among students rests with the adults, not with the students.”
- Two-thirds of campus principals have engaged in professional learning and identified supports based on campus needs.
- By examining math and literacy assessments and isolating race (one of six Courageous

Conversation protocol conditions), staff determined the level of supports necessary for the 2018-19 school year.

- Districtwide changes to curriculum include rewriting high school courses in African-American studies and Mexican-American studies and adding a middle school curriculum module in African-American studies.
- Equity walks, a strategy that engages principals in ongoing observation of and interaction with teachers, have contributed to evaluating district procedures and practices in the areas of special education and English language learners. In schools where principals regularly observed teaching and learning

through an equity lens, they were able to recommend adaptive changes, such as engaging more collaborative teacher action research observation and planning.

- Curriculum and instruction reflect the concepts that were presented in culturally relevant instructional coaching seminars. In every content area, teachers are now asked to plan according to the four R’s: relationship, realness, relevance, and rigor.

In St. Louis Park, school records and surveys of students and staff show changes in student outcomes as well as in school practices:

- Teachers are increasingly demanding more racial equity coaching time as measured by district professional

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development requests.

- Most principals are enrolled in an institute for courageous leadership.
- 2016-17 graduation results show black students graduating at a rate of 93%, which is 15% higher than the rate in 2013 and 10% higher than in 2015-16.
- 2016-17 graduation results show Latino students graduating at a rate of 90% compared to the state average of 66.3%. Achievement at this level has remained steady above the state average since 2015-16.
- According to student surveys, high percentages of students believe their teachers seek and value students' point of view (71%) and check frequently for understanding (74%).
- Even higher percentages report a sense of emotional

safety (87%) and a priority on persistence and rigor (89%).

Osei believes there is a connection between the persistence and rigor item and graduation and also points out that students report positive relationships with teachers. "In order to have relationships, staff must understand the impact of race and cultural relevance on student learning," he says. "Our work to engage in courageous conversations about race has helped to create the conditions for better staff/student relationships, therefore increasing students' ability to persist."

### PUTTING EQUITY AT THE CENTER

Equity is a mental model, a habit of mind, and a moral imperative to eliminate racial disparities in the experience and performance of all school system stakeholders.

This vital work does not correspond to the beginning or end of the school

day, nor is it limited to classroom practice, but must lie at the core of the personal, professional, and organizational belief of educators, educational institutions, and the communities they serve.

Courageous Conversation serves as a catalyst for fundamental dialogues about race and racism that must underlie systemic equity transformation in classrooms, schools, and districts. As business expert R. Spencer Darling has said, "All organizations are designed, intentionally or unwittingly, to achieve precisely the results they get." When we strive for racial equity, we must make the structures for achieving it intentional.

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**Glenn Singleton (**

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