

We find ourselves in an unprecedented time of challenge and hardship. Covid has turned America on her head and her schools along with her. We have seen heroic efforts on the part of local and state actors to do their best to ensure America's children continue to be fed, have homes and access to learning opportunities. Stories bubble up from across the country of districts putting lunch program production into high gear and bus drivers and others distributing those meals safely and consistently to those who need them. We have seen many local systems acquire, ready and deploy technology to students who lack devices, and negotiate with broadband providers and deploy cellular hotspots to try to significantly increase the number of students who have access to remote learning. We have seen teachers driving all over town to read at a safe distance or check in with students who they fear are feeling disconnected. In many ways, this crisis has illustrated just how responsive and inventive our teachers and our education system can be.

Now that most systems have made it through their initial response, new questions are emerging. Who is able to access continued learning and who is not? Which families are hit hardest by the virus itself and how does that impact families' trust in public services including education? Are the inequities we see now new or just magnified reflections of what has been true? If they aren't new, what has prevented many of us from seeing how stark the inequity was before now?

As we listen to learning partners like Gary Chapin, from the Center for Collaborative Education, we know we are not alone in also beginning to wonder:

- What do students have to say about what they see as both struggles and opportunities in this time?
- What are families learning about how their child learns and their ability, given the public assets they have access to, to support their child in learning?
- How are students and families each connecting to their peers to find help and support in this time?
- What do families and students most miss about school and what efforts are they most appreciative of or wishing for right now?
- What do families and students most hope for as we move forward from this crisis into a new normal?
- What are teachers learning about inequity and what new ideas do they have based on their 1:1 problem-solving experiences with learners and families?

And ultimately-- We center in on these two questions:

- How can public education systems learn from this time and shift to a significantly more equitable way of operating?
- How can public education systems distribute power and build trust going forward?

In equity seeking systems...



TRUST is RECIPROCAL



POWER is DISTRIBUTED

As part of our ongoing work with equity-seeking and innovation-oriented system leaders from around the nation, we have learned that having ways to sense accurately what is happening in the field not just with educators, but also learners and families, is essential to fighting inequity and leading systems to be ever more responsive to the lives, identities and aspirations of each learner in each family in each community. We have also learned that many system leaders struggle and/or are reluctant to change their disposition as a leader to make authentic and varied sensing possible.

However, as an organization committed to supporting equity-seeking systems transformation, we find ourselves hopeful in this moment, that such leadership dispositions may be more natural to a broader set of leaders. Before Covid many system leaders felt their trust with the public came from being the person with the right answer. They felt this way because, unfortunately, that is largely what we have trained many education leaders to believe.

Whatever their training and previous experience, all leaders must now find that there are a very small number of things for which the right answers are clear. Yes, get food out to families. Yes, address the basic technology needs you can. Yes, let teachers know that connection with students and families and continued learning is important. But how will we know if our inventive approach to supporting home learning is right? Most schools have never done anything like this before, and while we think families are counting on us to do not just something, but to do our best, we don't think anyone is expecting that their school system knows enough to have their first solution be optimal.

With that pressure relieved, we can give ourselves permission to try our first best idea, but then also to pause even in the midst of this crisis to ask, are we using a new mode to do the same things we have done in face-to-face interactions? Are we reinventing new ways to deliver a way of schooling that we know is less than optimal for all students and harmful to some? We must use some of this time to reflect and to honestly assess the impacts of our way of schooling, and we must take advantage of what we can learn right now from students and families who have recently developed new knowledge about how we can do better. [In a recent blog for Future Focused Education our colleague Doannie Tran](#) shares his experience as a parent in the age of Covid and makes a case for stepping into equity seeking leadership at this time beginning with seeking to learn from students and families about their experiences.

We believe this moment both welcomes and demands a responsive leadership disposition. The path to public trust is built by seeking input, and then both genuinely listening and responding to what students & families say. This is how real and lasting trust is built. It takes effort, humility and curiosity exhibited consistently over time. In many systems, in normal times, who is listened to and who the system responds to is inequitable. We worry that without concerted effort from system leaders, this tendency will be exacerbated in this time of crisis. What if the only families who provide feedback about our inventive approaches are those with stable income, fast internet, and time to seek us out?

Not all Americans are experiencing this crisis in the same way, because our public systems don't ensure the same level of access to education, healthcare or economic mobility. The demographic data about both infection and mortality rates due to Covid make very clear who our public systems protect and neglect. If we don't exert concerted effort to gather input across lines of difference and reach beyond those who are positioned to make providing input easy, our system will repeat one of its greatest and repeated failures, which is building itself primarily to align with the perceptions, needs and desires of mostly upper middle class and mostly white families.

We have been collaborating in the development of a [leadership framework](#) with leaders from around the country. It is a living document in which we capture common behaviors, strategies and roles of equity-seeking leaders. Here are a few components of this framework that feel especially relevant to leaders beginning, or continuing, to pivot their leadership disposition from needing to be the expert to seeking to demonstrate authentic curiosity and responsiveness.

Play a leadership role in influencing the mindsets, behaviors and processes across your system:

- Foster partnership by sharing leadership with voices and perspectives that haven't typically been welcomed into the conversation, processes or work.
- Seek to bring boundary spanning individuals and organizations into the work as much as possible, either through hiring or partnership.
- Openly pursue one or more equity-seeking learning agendas, which includes making the learning agenda known, engaging people across lines of difference in the process of learning, sharing findings both positive and negative, and explaining why changes are or are not made as the result of learning.

Play a leadership role in ensuring the flow of learning:

- Work together to ensure channels of information and learning flow across the system so that when original innovations yield compelling ideas, or when students and communities express new needs, the system knows and is able to respond.
- Use storytelling, awards/grants, and networking to elevate and connect equity seeking innovators and leaders from across the system.
- Use the introduction of new work & shared innovation endeavors to explicitly practice inclusive behaviors: working with new people, building new partnerships and reaching out across historical boundaries.

We encourage leaders to take this opportunity to redefine what makes them a trustworthy leader and to lean into partnership and listening to find their way forward in this trying time. And we are here to support leaders interested in learning more about how to lead this way. Feel free to begin a conversation in the comments section of our blog or to reach out to us via email (gretchen@leadingwithlearning.org) to let us know what you are learning in this time.

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