

# Skills

## for courageous leaders

School leaders can develop  
a culture of equity and  
excellence for all students  
by improving the  
quality of instruction.

**I**n working with many courageous school leaders from high- and low-performing schools around the country, I have realized the principals I successfully coached possessed very similar leadership traits: Good leaders develop a good vision, they follow through, they understand budgets, are instructional leaders who are visible to teachers, they facilitate the implementation of professional learning communities and they effectively use data to make decisions.

The purpose of this article is to provide a schema for Courageous Equity Leadership, including the three leadership traits Courageous Equity Leaders possess in leading results-driven schools. The three qualities that form the framework for Courageous Equity Leadership derive from the data collected from my coaching experience, site-level ob-

servations and principal interviews. CELs have captured results; developed a culture of equity and excellence; and have tightly linked coherence, congruency and commitment as leadership traits.

What got us here won't get us there. This is a reality school leaders are facing in moving all subgroups by 11 percent or more in English language arts and math. The quality of instruction must improve for every student.

The research of the 90/90/90 study (2000), the work of EdTrust and other educational studies all have one common key element: improving the quality of instruction! This is a simple but profound thought. Improving the teaching in our schools has cleared the waters for schools to close the

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*By Edwin Lou Javius*

racial achievement gap. To put it plainly, educational equity is about improving the quality of instruction!

School leaders must overtly share with their staff members the fact that equity is for everyone, and improving what we do is our equity initiative. There are far too many districts and schools struggling with their teachers about equity. It is not about saying to teachers, "Because of your racial make-up you can or cannot reach students of color." Equity is about being purposeful, intentional and deliberate in what we do to reach all students.

I agree that we need to develop after-school programs, mentors, double block schedules and parent involvement institutes. But the one fact I know is when classroom instruction is expert enough, students learn more, are less likely to have discipline referrals, and are more engaged.

As Ron Edmonds said in a 1978 speech, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

Do we have the Courageous Educational Leaders it will take to face the storm of mediocrity in our classrooms and improve the quality of instruction? Educational leaders must ask, "Do I understand instruction? Can I coach a proficient teacher to levels of mastery for all students? Do I possess the knowledge, skills and courage to improve the quality of instruction in my district or school?"

As a former secondary teacher, administrator and elementary principal, I made it my business to know the level of instruction on my watch. I believed the quality of instruction would not get better if I was not visible in classrooms, asking probing questions and having teachers reflect on their daily practice. This led to a number of grievances. However, I believe courageous leadership is about doing what is right despite opposition from colleagues, family or friends.

CELs demonstrate courage daily, and overtly challenge institutional and site-level inequities that prevent peak performance in teachers and students. They are committed to engaging their teachers' attitudes about

## Coherence, congruency and commitment



The research from Larry Lezotte (2007), Michael Fullan (1993), Kati Haycock and many other educators indicates clear and visible instructional leadership is found in exceptional schools. To add to their findings, I have observed and collected data on gap-closing schools. The leaders at exceptional schools possess the three qualities of a Courageous Equity Leader:

**1. Coherence.** CELs are very clear and concise in their verbal and written communication. This communication is easily transferable to others for clear action and next steps.

**2. Congruency.** CELs have the skills to align the district's direction and programs with their school's directions and programs. The CEL provides clear direction for grade levels/departments to see with great clarity the linkage of the school's instructional goals with teacher classroom goals, which produces increased student outcomes. From the research of Doug Reeves (2007), CELs also know the antecedents to program implementation and student success.

**3. Commitment.** CELs deeply understand the actions being committed. A CEL displays a ruthless compassion, taking action on what's right for all students despite the internal and external opposition that may come from board members, the district, colleagues, teachers and/or the community.

— Edwin Javius

teaching and student achievement. They deeply understand that teacher expectations are one of the greatest barriers to student achievement (Nobles, 1980).

### Race-conscious dialogue

CELs create professional learning communities to actively engage in race-conscious dialogue around data and teacher practice. The CEL takes a deeper look at disaggregated achievement data and names achieving and under-achieving groups by race, and understands that a professional learning community without race-conscious dialogue will not close the racial achievement gap. Courageous Equity Leaders understand the complexities of how race and culture intertwine with their district/school.

I would like to share one race-conscious

action of a Courageous Equity Leader that can be replicated by others. This middle school was unsuccessful with black male students and English-only Latino boys, as measured by the data from state and local assessments. The courageous leader named the challenge by race (black and brown boys) to the entire staff. Their PLCs discussed the data in racial terms. Not to say race caused the underachievement, but to recognize that the PLC needed to understand its students' racial identities and how race impacts student and teacher perceptions and practice.

The PLC began to address the issue with reckless abandon. It first developed an equity action plan to address the academic deficiencies of reading comprehension for the black and brown boys. The principal facilitated the PLC time by asking equity-driven

questions that required a different type of academic exploration by the teachers:

1. What evidence do we have to show we address the four literacies (social, emotional, cultural and academic) of black and brown boys (Tatum, 2005)?
2. What specific activities do the identified boys excel in during reading comprehension instruction?
3. If we asked the boys to share their

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academic frustrations in your classes, what would they say?

The team decided to build on the students' successes rather than try to deploy another layer of interventions. They realized the boys were actively involved when the stories they read had main characters that were black and/or brown. Students read with depth and detail when the information they were reading connected to their cultural and linguistic experiences.

Discovering the impact of culturally responsive literature, the team took immediate action to review the remaining sections of the district's pacing guide and identified essential readings that would be taught through a racial/cultural lens. The team had a 57 percent increase in reading comprehension scores among that group and academic increases for the entire class. The principal's role was to have the PLC explore how race and culture can be an avenue to connect with their students.

Despite valiant attempts to improve school leadership through leadership academies and instructional coaching, the void in current professional development programs for principals is glaring! Due to the absence of knowledge, skills and actions around educational equity, educational leaders are not prepared to close the achievement gap.

Most training programs have equity in the description to be addressed. However,

the two-hour or half-day attempt to address equity issues is like giving principals slingshots when they are in gun fights! Most principals would love to have the knowledge and skills to adequately engage their staff on race/culture and equity issues. Staff development programs must seriously look at what is needed for principals and district leaders to adequately lead our diverse schools. We must continually provide tools and practice for educators to engage in courageous dialogue to eliminate the racism of low expectations in our teaching and school practices.

### A professional development model

The Santa Clara County Office of Education has provided a professional development model to courageously engage county leaders. The county office, in conjunction with EDEquity, Inc. devoted an entire series of trainings for district and site leaders in Courageous Equity Leadership. The district teams are being exposed to theory, practice

and application to develop a race-conscious mindset in their daily practice.

The workshops provide clear steps to move race-based knowledge and conversations to instructional practice and leadership. The most powerful opportunity of the training gives the leaders the skills to have equity talks with staff and community. An article from the toolkit, "Can We Really Talk," can be downloaded to help you develop district and school norms for equity talks ([www.edequity.com/freeresources](http://www.edequity.com/freeresources)).

The key leadership qualities of coherence, congruency and commitment have proven to be an advantage for helping good leaders become great leaders. We must continue to explore the training and skills needed for our leaders to improve practices, protocols and perceptions to close the achievement gap. And we must be willing to accept that what got us here will not get us there! ■

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