

Maintaining an Equity Focus During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With Arria Coburn and Ellen Foley

The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, from the video interview “Maintaining an Equity Focus During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

How have you been using student-centered techniques during the pandemic to address social injustices in your school community?

Arria Coburn: So I think that one of the things that we really try to focus on again, is personalizing learning. And I think that we came back from our winter break and we had a set of plans, our teachers were recharged and we were ready to go. And then January hit. And of course we had the violence that broke out in Washington. So we were okay with pausing school. We were okay with scrapping our plans, even though we worked very hard and pulling together our students and our teachers to think about what we needed to do, to make sure that their voices were heard. And so I think that that's been a challenge and also a benefit for us as a school.

Because with remote learning, you're not just teaching the kids in your class, you could be teaching their family and everyone that's around listening. And so that definitely played in our mind, but we knew that it was important for us to be able to have those tough conversations when events happen in our community and in the surrounding world. So I think that it's really important for us to be okay with stopping, I guess, the pace of instruction that we're mandated to do and being responsive to what's happening in the community.

Ellen Foley: The Providence Public Schools, which I teach in, 360 is a Providence Public School. And they were taken over by our state in 2019, not long before the pandemic began. And there was a very, very challenging report from Johns Hopkins that was written about the schools, which was just terrible to read and what I did try to sort of make lemonade out of that, out of those lemons, by having students study that report and craft responses to it. So we did that last year, where I changed the timing of it this year. We're going to do it again this year. And I think one of the things... And I don't know if this is a student-centered practice, but I think one of the big developments for me, is just really highlighting the structural racism and inequality that exists. And I think being able to help kids not internalize.

I think one of the things I felt concerned about was the that Johns Hopkins report was such a downer for students, it was so difficult, and they've not only internalized those messages at that point, they've internalized those messages their entire lives, that they're somehow less, or not worth as much, or not as good. And that was certainly what that report was saying about our schools and schools that many of them had attended their whole entire lives. So, I think being able to call out the structural racism and inequality is really an important part of helping students feel more efficacy in dealing with the challenges that our society faces in this area. And also to help them feel that they can change it as opposed to internalizing those messages.

As an educator committed to student-centered learning and social justice, what have been your greatest challenges this year?

Arria Coburn: I think the challenge is, obviously I want to say not enough time because I think that that's always sort of the go-to. I think just the ability to pause and reflect sometimes. Prior to the pandemic and the closure, when events happened, it was very easy to pull teachers together and to be thoughtful and strategic. And I think that because we're all on Zoom, we're all in different places. Sometimes that challenge is difficult. I feel very blessed. My teachers have gathered on a Zoom call at seven o'clock at night to figure out how we're going to respond and create a school-wide lesson the very next day. And so that's been great.

I think the other challenge is just the emotional toll, the closure and the pandemic is having on educators. I see teachers working extremely hard and harder than ever before. And as a leader, that feels difficult because I also know that at any given time I may need to send an email to them that is talking about another schedule change or a potential reopening. We're in the point right now where we are preparing to reopen school and that's going to result in a complete schedule overhaul and that's hard. And so that's been a challenge to as a leader, balance the changes and also be supportive and show empathy for your students and your staff.

Ellen Foley: That mismatch between the mathematics curriculum and what students find engaging and important and necessary, and the mismatch between what the curriculum requires, and the math based changes that have occurred in our society since I was in high school. I find it really frustrating that the algebra to calculus pathway is so privileged in high school. And in part, because it's what competitive colleges are asking students to have. Statistics on the other hand, which I do teach, and I'm happy to teach that at my high school. I also teach pre-calculus, but statistics really is something that's much more applicable and it can be connected so easily to computer science, and help students build coding and machine learning skills.

So I think that's a big frustration that I have that this mismatch exists between what would be engaging and helpful and practical for students, and what they are supposed to know. And if you ask most mathematicians, it kind of takes the creativity and dynamism out of math as well. And so I think we're really selling students short on the STEM based careers, that could be open to them if they were really excited by the content.

What advice would you give other educators or school leaders working during the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to promote greater equity?

Arria Coburn: I think that that's a great question. I always go back to who are my stakeholders and am I taking time to listen to them? Have I asked the right set of questions? And so the advice I would give is to tap into your stakeholders and really think of them as a partner in learning. And so students have a lot to say and families do as well. And I think that prior to the closure, we took that for granted. We weren't really thinking about how to leverage those community relationships, to support student learning. And so I would say definitely tapping into your families. I think being transparent and I think being humble.

I think it's okay to have a family meeting and say like, "Okay, so I've shared sort of the school plan. Now I want you to be honest, what's working and what's not?" And then having an action plan in place to say, "great. So I've heard you say that this is working in this isn't, here's what I'm going to do about it." And then responding to it. Or then saying like, "Okay, I've heard that information, I'm going to go meet with another group of stakeholders." And then you put it all together and then you form a committee. And so

I think it's a constant cycle of sharing feedback, getting feedback, and responding to it. So that would be the advice.

The other piece that I think is really important is being responsive to what's happening in the world around us. I think many times leaders feel the pressure from making sure that you're on pace, that you're hitting all of those benchmarks, that the students are mastering all of the standards, that they're getting ready for the high-stake assessments. And for me, yes, that's important, but it is just as important to make sure that you're taking care of the social emotional wellbeing of students. And so I would say that you have to have a balance. And sometimes the social emotional wellbeing is more important than the academic piece. And I think that that's okay. And I think as leaders, sometimes that's hard because the last thing that you want to do is widen the gap for our students, especially our subgroups that we know struggle. But I believe, it is my belief that when you are focused on the social emotional wellbeing of students, the academic piece will follow after.

Ellen Foley: We really have come through something in these last six months, and since we started in September. And I have to say, the biggest advice I could give is stick with it because in September, when we first started and some kids started on September 13th and some kids started on October 1st, or September 29th or whatever it was, there were some kids who thought, oh, I don't have to go to school until... School isn't really starting, they were supposed to be doing work online. But if you keep consistently sending the messages, no, you're still working even though you're home. You can't come to school just one day and not do work the other days.

If you keep sending those messages. If you keep... It seems to have jelled now. They seem to understand that there's... I think teachers have more systems in place as well to help students understand how to access work online, even when they're not in class, how to connect with them when we're not right in front of each other. So our attendance has just started to improve dramatically in the last month since January. And just the engagement has improved. So I think sticking with it and just being consistent about those messages, don't give up. Yeah, if you, if give up and say, "Oh, well, I'm not going to, I don't know, give assignments on their off days." Then that just reinforces this idea that they don't have to do work on their off days or that they don't have to participate or engage on their home days, I should say. They're not off days.

So those are the kinds of messages we have to be more consistent about. But that sticking with it is really important. And it does seem to be working. And especially as the numbers have gone down, and we have fewer students who are quarantining, or home with sick relatives and those kinds of things, attendance is better. And there's just a good feeling in school. I think kids are really appreciating school more under the circumstances, even though it's not ideal, it is a place that they have relationships and can connect with people and can think about something else for a while.