

Leadership Tips and Talking Points June 2021

Be relentless about promoting a positive vision of education, opportunity, and inclusion in your community. Advocate for your school district's values.

Be clear about what your school community stands for. Routinely remind your staff, families, and community of your school district's shared values, with a particular emphasis on values like fairness, respect, inclusion, kindness, responsibility, equity, pragmatism, etc.

Anticipate pushback and judgment ... and stay on message.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work is a hotly divided topic right now in the United States. No matter what your district does, there is almost certainly going to be a wide variety of opinion about it. There is no one course of action that is universally supported. Whether your district is doing very little related to DEI or whether your district is actively and assertively changing your system, you will be judged (that's a given) and you could find yourself targeted by national groups who lean on local citizens to promote their agendas.

For this reason, it is important to be clear about what actions your district is taking and why.

Be especially confident in your ability to articulate "the why." Having clarity about the student needs that are guiding your decisions and actions will give you strength to stay on message when you are feeling targeted and stressed.

Do not get dragged into a politicized debate about national ideas. Stay laser-focused on your students, their needs, and your local actions.

Respond as appropriate to critics, but reserve most of your energy for doing the good work of educating your community's children. Stay focused on your district's priorities and on supporting and leading the team that gets this important work done. Do not let extremists distract you from your purpose.

Here are a few things you can say to redirect a conversation away from a debate of national ideas and toward a conversation that can be more productive:

- *"Rather than getting caught up in the national debate, let's talk about what's actually happening here in our community ..."*
- Or, *"Some people are using terminology like 'critical race theory' in ways that are confusing, but our commitments here in ABC community are pretty simple: ..."*
- Then highlight equity-related aspects of your strategic plan or district mission and values, for example: serving all students, ensuring all students are treated fairly, empowering all students to succeed, working to close achievement gaps across the system, making sure our schools are safe and inviting places for all children to learn, etc.

Reframe the issue in your own words.

Don't waste your time trying to explain terms that have become politicized. There is no benefit in arguing about whether a particular word, phrase, or acronym like DEI or "critical race theory" (CRT) is being used correctly. While you might feel more confident in these discussions if you deepen your understanding of what CRT is and isn't, you don't need to be an expert in current buzz words in order to talk confidently about how your district is working to advance equity. Use terms that are familiar to your community. In fact, in most cases it is best to keep using the terms you have already been using to describe the work you are already doing.

Educate yourself about the experiences of people who are different from you.

Every community has diversity. Your school district undoubtedly serves people who are very different from yourself. One of your jobs as a leader is to understand the needs of the people you were hired or elected to serve. Let your students, their experiences and their outcomes be your biggest teacher. Take the time to educate yourself, particularly about the cultures and histories of those who feel most different to you. You might not like or agree with everything you learn, but you will be better able to understand where others are coming from, which will make you a better leader.

Bring the same skills to bear with your critics that you bring to equity work.

Resist the sometimes very tempting urge to lump your critics together and dismiss their concerns wholesale. DEI work asks us to look at each of our students as individuals and seek to meet their specific needs while also considering what unfair systemic barriers they might be facing and how we can break those down. Bring the EXACT same skills to bear as you consider how best to approach or respond to local critics. Treat them as individuals. Look beyond talking points that they might have copied off the internet and seek to understand the personal concerns and emotions that are driving them to think and behave as they are. Meet them where they are, respectfully. Listen deeply. Let them know you have listened. Look hard for common ground, even if it is small. Emphasize that.

This is a strong approach for leading any kind of conflict resolution. It is disarming to be received with respect and active listening when expecting defensiveness and argument. That doesn't mean that this approach will work with people who are determined to be disruptors, but it can be remarkably healing and productive when dealing with those who are on the fringe of an extremist viewpoint and swayed back to moderate ground.

While it is important that you act in an open, respectful, inclusive way with your critics, do not placate bigotry or racism. When faced with perspectives or demands that are bigoted, be prepared to calmly, respectfully, and firmly reiterate your personal and organizational commitment to equity and the celebration of all members of your educational community.

Have strong procedures in place for public meetings.

Some people genuinely are not interested in conflict resolution or common ground, but are instead determined to be disruptive. When faced with disruptive activists, you will need to lean on strong and consistent procedures (for example, agendas with specific times and formats for public input), clear expectations for behavior in meetings, as well as the personal strength and leadership confidence to enforce the rules fairly and consistently.

Be very cautious about creating opportunities for individuals to “take over” meetings while emotions are high. Focus on small group dialogue. Seek input in writing rather than using a report-out approach. Be able to turn off microphones if needed to enforce time limits.

Plan ahead for the possibility of escalating political action and changing forms of demonstration and advocacy. If you haven’t already, talk with local law enforcement leaders about how to work together if needed to ensure the safety of public meetings or address potential harassment.

Accept that this issue brings out big emotions.

One of the skills we must strengthen is the ability to hear people who are emotionally charged without becoming dismissive, defensive, or emotionally charged ourselves. It is not ok to dismiss the content of constituents’ concerns simply because they might be expressed in a way that is uncomfortable for us. So, while it is important to have strong procedures in place to ensure public meetings remain safe and productive during times of high emotions, it is also important to give your community outlets to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them.

When positive engagement fails, consider aspects of the “grey rock” approach.

When dealing with people who are manipulative, dramatic, or abusive, there is an approach called being a grey rock. With apologies to geologists, the idea is to become as uninteresting as a grey rock so that the bad behavior becomes less fun. Advocates of the grey rock approach note three important elements:

- be as brief as possible when dealing with abusive people;
- be scrupulously factual; and
- avoid emotional engagement (don’t let yourself get hooked!).

As a school leader, you can borrow elements of this strategy. You are not obligated to create fresh responses to repetitive messages, for example. There are times to stop the ongoing conversation, especially when the other party is determined to misunderstand and manipulate. In those cases, refer back to previous conversations, decisions, and responses. Point out the many opportunities to provide feedback into the district’s direction. Then, focus on the good work ahead of you and give the drama only as much of your attention as is absolutely necessary.

Be honest and emotionally neutral in your assessment and description of your community's current reality.

Acknowledge any division that exists, but don't "admire it." Also, resist the urge to minimize differences (it is disingenuous and harms trust). Use emotionally neutral words and phrases.

- *"This is an area where our community has differences of perspective ..."*
- *"We acknowledge that there is a wide variety of opinions on this issue ..."*

Know that, in some cases, the most vocal activists are getting their lists of concerns and ideas for action from national or even international movements.

Leaders of a number of current political movements have created strategies to make their national agendas feel local. They advocate ways to target school leaders so that you will feel pressure at work, at home, and in the community. They might target school board members' places of business or engage in other forms of advocacy and social pressure. They will make their messaging feel very personal, even when they are following a playbook step-by-step. Do not let yourself get distracted from the good work you are doing.

Increase the amount of time set aside for dialogue and facilitated reflection.

It is much harder to stereotype, demonize, and dismiss each other if we truly know each other. Supporting strong relationships that cross typical demographic or political lines within your educational community is one way to help inoculate your district against extremists. Create opportunities throughout your system for tabletop or small group dialogue with thoughtful prompts. This work is not linear and it is dialogue-heavy. It can also feel isolating, especially if your community is heavily divided. Set aside time for people to connect in meaningful ways. Invest in relationships.

Do not try to do this work alone.

Create a leadership team that can be co-learners, thought partners, and key connectors in the work. Start with your existing leadership team and build your collective capacity to understand and talk about bias, to look for patterns in your student outcomes data, and to listen deeply to those with whom we disagree. Remember to include students and family members in this early work. Build out from there. This alone will bring immediate benefits to schools and families.

At the same time, embrace the idea that this is community work, not just a school district initiative. In addition to building capacity within your internal circles of leadership and influence, invite organizations like the food bank, child care providers, community coalitions, etc. into the conversation. Such a leadership group lends breadth and strength to the work.

Also remember that you are not alone as a leader. Remember to connect with others you trust. Talk about your experiences, share your concerns, seek support and guidance. WASA, WSSDA, WSPRA, and other professional associations have resources and connections that can help you navigate the complexities of these times.

Finally, remember that good self-care is a leadership decision.

Leaders who take care of their personal needs for rest, activity, social support, and good nutrition are able to make better decisions under pressure than people who are depleted, stagnated, exhausted, or hungry. Take extra good care of yourself when stress levels are highest (especially in advance of big public meetings and times of anticipated conflict) and expect the rest of your district's leadership team to do the same.



Equity In A Divided Community

Questions & Answers about CRT

June 2021

What is critical race theory?

- Critical race theory (CRT) refers to a broad collection of legal and academic topics that examine social, cultural and legal issues as they relate to race and racism. CRT holds that race is not biological, but is a socially constructed idea
- CRT teaches that bias is embedded within our institutions, laws, and public policy. The theory posits that this embedded bias affects each of us differently and is primarily responsible for the unequal outcomes we see in systems like education, health care, etc.
- CRT is a framework that is used to help understand why racial inequities exist in our systems and how to eliminate them. In the education system, it can be used to understand issues of disparity in school discipline, tracking and standardized testing.

Why are we hearing about critical race theory now?

Why is our school district/school board getting questions about it?

While the academic and legal term has been around since the 1970s, the term “critical race theory” has begun to be used recently as a political shortcut to lump together a variety of positions and practices. Many times, the term is used without being fully understood by the user. Because of this, many important equity initiatives that are not CRT are getting swept up in the current debate.

Within school districts in Washington state, there are many efforts to increase access to opportunities for all students to be successful and to close opportunity gaps between students. These are broadly referred to as an equity focus, equity initiatives or using an equity lens. These are not the same as critical race theory, although some of them may contain similar elements, such as analyzing a school district's policies to determine if they disproportionately impact some student groups more than others. Equity in education is about making sure our systems are set up so that all students are able to succeed.

I've heard community members say that critical race theory is divisive and is designed to make people feel guilty about their racial identity or identify as an

“oppressor” or as “oppressed.” Another concern raised is that we are “indoctrinating” students and that it is counter-productive to focus on racial issues. How do we respond as district leaders?

You could approach this in a variety of ways. You might choose to talk about what CRT is and isn't. Critical race theory is not centered on blaming individuals or making anyone feel guilty. It focuses on understanding how race plays a role in how institutions like education serve people. Furthermore, there is nothing in critical race theory that promotes the idea that any race is superior to any other; in fact, most racial justice work promotes the exact opposite idea.

Getting into a debate about terms associated with CRT is something of an academic exercise, though. What matters to most people is what is happening in their own schools.

For this reason, it is critically important to ensure your community understands what your district's equity efforts encompass. Educational leaders are constantly seeking how to better support the success of students, while ensuring that students who need extra or different supports to be successful get what they need every day in every classroom. Educators want all students to succeed. Help your community see this. Make your equity work as transparent as possible. Share the data that are driving your decisions. Make it easy for families to view curricular materials so they can see for their own eyes what your schools are teaching. Provide context by reminding your community of the process you go through for all curriculum adoptions, being sure to note the opportunities for review and input.

It is also important to note that the equity training required in Washington state's SB 5044 is only about training for adults in the system, namely school board members, district and school leaders and educators. **Nothing in SB 5044 mentions curriculum or lessons for students.** It also does not include any mention of critical race theory or any specific curriculum for the training programs for adults.

WSSDA is developing the equity training for school directors while other organizations, including the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), are developing training for other indicated groups. See [Fact Sheet: SB 5044 & WSSDA's Equity Training](#)

Some say that our district's equity policy / equity initiatives / culturally responsive teaching practices are CRT in disguise. How do we respond to this?

Start by listening respectfully and attentively and asking questions for understanding. Ask what they mean when they refer to the broad concept of critical race theory. Ask what their exact concerns are within your school district and/or within their children's school.

Without being dismissive or combative, calmly correct misinformation and delineate what your local school district is or isn't doing in contrast to what a larger national narrative may be suggesting.

Next, reframe the discussion by sharing the goals and efforts within your district to ensure every student has access to an equitable education and what they need to be successful. If equity is included in your strategic plan and/or within a board-adopted equity policy, refer community members to those guiding principles, which are usually developed with community partners.

Why is there such a big focus on “equity in education?” Shouldn’t we just treat all students equally?

As any parent of more than one child can attest, different children have different needs. Equity is about that simple and instinctive understanding that each student needs different supports, and that the same student may need extra support in one area but not in another.

School districts regularly review student outcome data to understand which students are more successful or less successful academically. District staff also review differences exist in how disciplinary actions are applied to students. Nationally and in Washington state, these gaps exist between a variety of student groups. Examples of those groups include:

- Students from low-income households
- Students with disabilities
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students in foster care
- Students who are English-language learners
- Students of different races and/or ethnicities

The education system in the U.S. has long supported additional funding and other supports for students who have been less successful academically than others. For example, federal Title I funding is designed to support the success of students from low-income families. Another area where different types of support are provided to some students is through IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act), which is the primary funding source for supplementing local and state dollars to support the needs of students with disabilities and special education programs.

Here is a helpful listing to federal funding for various student categories:

[An Overview of Federal Education Funding \(azk12.org\)](http://azk12.org)

Washington state student data shows significant disparities in a variety of student outcomes, including academic assessments, student discipline, readiness for kindergarten, graduation rates, placement in advanced coursework and college attendance after graduation. When disparities are evident in the academic outcomes between groups of students, most school leaders agree that it is the moral and legal obligation of the school district to study why those gaps exist and support policies and practices that close them.

School board-superintendent teams cannot address the disparities– whether they are racial, economic, or some other factor – if they don’t discuss, evaluate and work to mitigate them.

Our district leadership team is not in agreement about how to approach these community concerns. How do we navigate this topic?

Similar to how you approach community concerns, your first step is to take the time to share concerns or confusion honestly with each other to learn more. Get curious. Focus on listening carefully to each person without turning it into a debate.

We strongly encourage you to bring student voice into the conversation. Listen to students sharing their experiences and/or review student survey data. Look at your district's disaggregated data together and discuss what you find. Where there are differences of opinion, let the data be your guide in determining how to approach to equity to close gaps in your district. Sharing your findings and goals to support the success of each and every student with your community so they understand why equity is a benefit to all students.

We have followed all of these recommendations and there are still people in our community who disagree with our approach. What now?

It is unrealistic to hope that everyone in your community will completely agree on any given topic, so it is most productive to focus on where you find agreement and not dwell on areas where you do not. This is not unlike other controversial topics, including work stoppage negotiations or standardized testing, where there are emotional and deeply rooted feelings on either side of an issue. It is important to remain open and transparent, providing resources for the community to review and use to come to their own conclusions about educational equity.

Additional Resources for Information

[Critical race theory invades school boards - NBS News](#)

[A Lesson on Critical Race Theory \(americanbar.org\)](#)

[Former GA Teacher of the Year - Debate over critical race theory is heartbreaking](#)



ESSB 5044 & WSSDA Equity Training for School Directors and Boards FACT SHEET • June 2021

1. What is ESSB 5044?

ESSB 5044 (which created a new section of 28.345 RCW) titled *AN ACT Relating to equity, cultural competency, and dismantling institutional racism in the public school system*, is a bill passed by the Washington state legislature and signed into law by the governor in April 2021. Among other things, the law requires WSSDA to identify or develop and periodically update governance training programs that align with Cultural Competency, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion standards for school director governance. **This bill has no component of training or curriculum for students.**

2. How is WSSDA responding to the requirements within ESSB 5044?

WSSDA has supported school directors and boards for many years in their goal to seek educational equity for their students and close opportunity gaps within their districts and across the state. WSSDA's OnBoard Professional Learning System for School Directors and School Boards weaves equity across all areas of training, from finance to strategic planning to district oversight. Additionally, the OnBoard framework includes specific trainings that explore what equity means, how it differs from equality, why it creates better student outcomes, and what the role of the board is in moving towards equity.

By the end of 2021, there will be multiple training opportunities for school directors to become more knowledgeable about equity, diversity, inclusion and cultural proficiency that will meet the requirements of ESSB 5044.

3. What is included in these WSSDA OnBoard trainings?

The training provides opportunities for school directors to increase their personal cultural proficiency, understand the terminology, and learn about the impacts of equity, diversity and inclusion on student outcomes. Training focuses on the role of the school board and how, through policies and practices, school directors can use their leadership position in education to close the gaps in various success factors for their students.

4. Who is creating the training to fulfill ESSB 5044?

WSSDA is creating the training for school directors. ESSB 5044 also calls for the training of school district staff and superintendents. Other groups are responsible for training for other education groups.

5. What do the terms equity, diversity and inclusion (sometimes referred to as DEI) and cultural competency mean?

Those terms are defined in ESSB 5044 as follows:

- **Diversity** describes the presence of similarities and differences within a given setting, collective, or group based on multiple factors including race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, age, educational status, religion, geography, primary language, culture, and other characteristics and experiences;
- **Equity** includes developing, strengthening, and supporting procedural and outcome fairness in systems, procedures, and resource distribution mechanisms to create equitable opportunities for all

individuals, and also includes eliminating barriers that prevent the full participation of individuals and groups; and

- **Inclusion** describes intentional efforts and consistent sets of actions to create and sustain a sense of respect, belonging, safety, and attention to individual needs and backgrounds that ensure full access to engagement and participation in available activities and opportunities.
- **Cultural Competency** includes knowledge of student cultural histories and contexts, as well as family norms and values in different cultures; knowledge and skills in accessing community resources and community and parent outreach; and skills in adapting instruction to students' experiences and identifying cultural contexts for individual students. **Culturally Competent** educational leaders have a mindset and behaviors that enable them to foster policies and practices that provide the opportunity to effectively engage with and serve diverse students, educators and community members.

6. Is critical race theory included in the training topics/required in ESSB 5044?

Critical race theory is not named in ESSB 5044, nor is any specific curriculum.

Still under development, WSSDA's equity trainings will include learning experiences organized around the concepts and practices of educational equity as they relate to the role of school directors, including:

1. Promoting educational diversity and inclusion
2. Developing cultural proficiency as an education leader
3. Addressing equitable educational opportunities and closing opportunity gaps
4. Understanding and dismantling institutional discrimination and racism in the educational system