

## **Equity Corner**

**December 2007**

### **Use Proactive Communication to Address Equity Issues**

It is recognized by leaders everywhere that it is “better to be proactive rather than reactive.” It is critical to be “ahead of the curve.” According to Leadership Management Basics, there are a number of proactive traits that make a leader successful, including (1) maintaining a positive attitude which declares, “I won’t give up,” (2) acting instead of reacting, (3) taking advantage of opportunities, (4) investing in staff, and (5) maintaining a sense of control.

These proactive factors are true in communication matters as well—including communication about equity and non-discrimination issues. How does a district become proactive about equity? There are several steps involved.

#### **Step 1: Set the Vision**

It is critical that school boards and district leaders realize that equity and non-discrimination are important elements to discuss and to provide guidance for the district. A school board has to determine what the vision is for the district? A discrimination-free environment? A culturally welcoming attitude? Staff who recognize and uphold these premises? Yes, these are all achievable, but they all begin with the vision which must be clearly established.

#### **Step 2: Make the Commitment**

After the board and leadership set the vision, a commitment to follow through must be made. That involves developing policies and procedures designed to drive and support the vision. Policies and procedures need to encompass all areas of equity and non-discrimination that are legally and morally required—handicap, gender, size, bullying, sexual orientation, culture, conflict, poverty, etc. And these policies and procedures must reach beyond the classroom.

#### **Step 3: Communicate the Commitment**

There is a multitude of ways that districts can use to communicate their commitment to equity issues.

- Make copies of board policies and procedures available to the public
- Put the information on the district web site
- Include information in student/parent handbooks
- Include appropriate information in staff newsletters
- Provide staff development experiences can communicate commitment to staff and can help them to identify bias, stereotyping, or other signs of concern.
- Establish a procedure for individuals to report incidences of discrimination, bullying, or conflict

#### **Step 4: Establish the Environment**

The most important step that a district can take to communicate its commitment to equity issues is to establish the right environment. How can this be accomplished?

- Developing a setting that does not tolerate any form of discrimination or bullying

- Responding according to established district procedures to any complaints
- Creating an atmosphere in which individuals feel comfortable to relate to adults enough to report concerns
- Hiring staff that support equity issues
- Making the physical environment of the school welcoming to all individuals and cultures
- Encouraging staff-to-student communication about equity issues
- Including a comprehensive curriculum that helps to dispel stereotypes and biases and that creates respect for others

According to Michael Caruso, “Leadership is the ability to merge commitment and wisdom into a single vision to succeed, and using this vision in motivating (others) to share in the mission that unites them.” It is incumbent upon school boards and district leaders to provide leadership in equity issues. A proactive approach will provide multiple benefits to the district and the community.