



“Ask Us. Involve Us.”

Sound Advice to Heads of School from DEI Directors & Practitioners

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This spring has left many people wondering whether we will recognize the world as we knew it when we fully emerge from life under a quarantine. This uncertainty has been especially present in schools. For better or for worse, schools often serve as places of predictability and routine, even in the most difficult times. Never before has a crisis so upset the usual rhythm of a school year on such a broad scale. Indeed, this will be a time when students remember the love and care they received far more than any academic accomplishment.

This moment is perhaps doubly-complicated for educators focused on the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in schools. Prior to mid-March, DEI practitioners were already engaged in the very daunting and challenging work of interrupting problematic norms and cultural practices to bring about more equitable school environments. While this work has led to many positive changes for our schools, it can also be accompanied by a disproportionate amount of resistance, isolation, and psychic pain for DEI practitioners. Since COVID-19 has done the work of thoroughly “interrupting” school life in ways unimaginable before, what will the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion look like going forward? Can the progress made continue, or will the inequities exposed by this crisis set our schools backwards? Will DEI work still have “a seat at the table,” or will the crush of emergent challenges push this work to the side?

This document will not answer these colossal questions. Only time and the work of outstanding educators will do that. However, it has always been clear that the most positive change often occurs when there is a clear, unwavering commitment to DEI practices from Heads of Schools.

If support for change does not exist at the top of an institution, it is ever more challenging to develop a critical mass of support in the rest of the school community. With this in mind, Pollyanna posed a single question to over 100 DEI Directors and practitioners across the country to consider in light of the COVID-19 crisis:

If you could offer your Head of School one piece of DEI-focused advice or an effective community-building practice for them to implement or thoughtfully consider when planning and making decisions, what would it be?

The responses received were thoughtful, practical, and potentially transformational. They organized themselves into three main categories:

- **developing more inclusive decision-making**
- **offering concrete DEI support for members of the school community**
- **framing COVID-19 as an opportunity to deepen DEI work at our schools**

The anonymity of the responses lends to them an authentic, unvarnished quality that might be challenging to capture in more formal settings. Our hope is that they offer Heads sound advice for renewing, strengthening, and forwarding their commitment to DEI work.

“Make Your DEI Person Your Right Hand”

Developing Inclusive Decision-Making

Among our respondents, the COVID-19 crisis has stoked fears that DEI practitioners will see their voices marginalized in the wake of new concerns that, for some, may seem “unrelated” to or “more important than” DEI work:

- **“DEI is not enrichment - it is bedrock. If you are in planning meetings without DEI at the table with you, you have a gaping blind spot and liability.”**

This sense led many respondents to advocate for concrete measures to ensure that DEI voices are central to the conversations that shape policy and practice in schools:

- **“DEI professionals should be consulted before any major communication goes out to the school community. They should be consulted on any major shifts to the academic or school-wide program.”**
- **“One great practice for heads during meetings to dedicate a set time of the meeting to equity work. (Don’t discount the voice of marginalized people in the room). Making sure that at the end of every meeting, the inclusion and the equity piece was apparent and actionable.”**

- **“When it comes to DEI work in schools and you are looking to support students - ask students what they need and build programs around that feedback. When it comes to DEI work in schools and you are looking to support faculty and staff - ask faculty and staff what they need and build programs around that feedback. When it comes to DEI work in schools and the work they do as it impacts the community, - ask community members what they need and build programs around that feedback.”**

In an ideal world, every Head of School will be an experienced and effective DEI practitioner. Until that time exists, engaging, partnering, and constructively challenging the practices of school leadership is one of the most important responsibilities for DEI Directors. Given the inequities laid bare in our society by the COVID-19 crisis, DEI voices are more important in current decision making conversations than they were before. As one DEI Director in the survey argued, now is the perfect moment for a Head to “make your DEI person your right hand” and engage in true partnership in DEI work.

“Give a Diverse Range of Options to Everyone for ‘Showing Up’”

Offering Concrete DEI Support for the School Community

Many of the survey responses focused on Heads offering concrete DEI support for teachers during this time of crisis. The responses recognized that, in every context, the relationship between students and their teachers is the most essential and basic building block for creating the most equitable school communities. Respondents encouraged Heads to consider how they could apply a DEI lens to strengthen this relationship through professional development and better cultivation of effective equity practices:

- **“Have a checklist of protocols (around equity, cultural competency, communication, etc.) and charge the Leadership Team with using them in all their work to make a strong statement about the importance and central focus of DEI thinking during this pandemic.”**

- **“Make sure staff members are fully allowed to participate in all PD opportunities and have sufficient financial and emotional support for part-time DEI coordinators.”**
- **“Mandate something in which everyone must participate throughout the year: training in the beginning of the year with regular, meaningful follow-ups; reading a book with DEI themes; and have discussions and/or related-activities.”**
- **“It is not acceptable any longer for teachers not to be comfortable/competent discussing equity issues with each other, their students, and families. PD is a necessity.”**

This advice also extended, more generally, to how Heads might concretely support students and families from a DEI perspective during this crisis:

- **“Understand it may be more difficult than ever for students and adults to bring their full selves and attention to school/work. Give a diverse range of options to everyone for ‘showing up.’”**
- **“Please provide counselors, therapists, social workers of color to work with students, families, faculty, and staff of color who are experiencing this pandemic more severely than other communities.”**
- **“Don’t assume your families and faculty have adequate access to healthcare - even those with insurance are challenged, let alone those without insurance - people have lost jobs and insurance.”**

Finally, one DEI Director offered a specific insight and challenge relating to the unique challenges and opportunities of distance learning:

- **“COVID-19 will only exacerbate disparities in academic achievement between children. Ensuring that those gaps close and that all children achieve academic excellence should be a top priority in this moment. Distance learning offers a unique opportunity to offer a personalized educational experience for each child, one that is uniquely designed to help every child reach her full potential. Don’t let this be a moment where the families with private tutors soar ahead and everyone else struggles to learn. Give your teachers the support and resources they need to spend one-on-one time with each student in order to make sure all thrive.”**

As always, every school constituency hopes to be positively connected to senior leadership. In this moment of distance learning, the survey results suggest that leadership from Heads that is concrete and tangible is more important than ever. This will not only reassure the community of the importance of DEI work, but may also offer practical resources to community members who are more vulnerable and whose needs may have shifted greatly during the pandemic.

“Crises Reveal Character” Framing the COVID-19 Crisis as Opportunity to Deepen DEI Work

In every context, school communities look to Heads of School for symbolic moral leadership. The manner in which a Head symbolically frames a school’s priorities might often feel more important to a school community than fundraising, the construction of new facilities, or other “big ticket” items for which a Head has responsibility. Through their survey responses, DEI Directors and practitioners advise Heads to take seriously the manner in which they symbolically frame the importance of DEI work in response to the COVID-19 crisis. An emergent theme in the responses is that this crisis only serves to emphasize the centrality of efforts to create a more equitable and just society, starting with how we frame these efforts in our schools:

- **“DEI is never a ‘nice to have’; it is an essential component of what we do and how we care for our community. Despite all the other things we have to think about during this time, it is more important than ever to do this work.”**
- **“Crises reveal character. Ensure that your DEI work remains at the forefront. If it falls to the background, that says something important about your school and your community, and you risk alienating folks with whom you’ve worked hard to build relationships. Instead, make a clear statement that DEI work will remain a priority as we think about summer and fall**

planning, then determine the concrete ways in which you are going to make this happen, i.e. how will your DEI practitioner be involved; how will messaging go; where does DEI sit on agendas, webinars, town halls, etc.”

- **“During this time more than ever, we should be paying attention to inequities, discrimination, xenophobia, systemic racism, mental health, etc. All of this, plus much more are intricately woven into everything COVID-19, and we must not only be mindful of DEI while making decisions for next school year, but in everything we do.”**

Moreover, respondents indicate how this crisis has increased, not lessened, the sense of urgency for deeper, more committed DEI work in schools.

- **“When admin says, ‘take baby steps’ or ‘that [DEI work] it is not the focus right now’, that comes from a place of privilege. Those who are marginalized do not have that luxury to wait for the work to be done.”**

This is the moment for Heads and senior leadership to move decisively towards the challenges of inequity in our schools. As evidenced throughout our society, the consequences of inaction for marginalized members of school communities are steep and immediate.

“Prioritize Relationships and Find Ways for All Voices to Be Heard”

More Care, More Connection, More Voices

Every school community will endure its own set of challenges due to COVID-19. Some, like community members who fall ill, will be immediate. Others, like financial and enrollment problems, will feel present and threatening like an approaching storm. Regardless of the nature of these challenges, the underlying values of care and connection always present in DEI work can provide the most effective tools to help move our communities forward in a time of great upheaval:

- **“This is a time for deepening relationships and the communal sense of belonging, not a moment for advancing academic progress. That ship has sailed. Our people, of all ages, need something to beat back the daily isolation, depression, and loss that we are all experiencing to varied degrees. We should be using academic work as a method for connection, not connecting as a means to complete academic work. This is, hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime interruption. Our students will not look back and recall, fondly, that they were able to complete Algebra II during this time. They will, if we are lucky, recall that adults in their school community were looking out for them, checking in on them, finding ways to stay connected to them, and providing love and support and a new normal during an unprecedented global crisis.”**

The work of creating more equitable schools has always called us to value more care, more connection, and more voices, particularly among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in our communities. For Heads, DEI Directors and practitioners can provide key resources, insights, and understandings that will benefit a school’s “recovery” from an inherently traumatic episode in time. The overarching theme of this survey is an urgent call for Heads to more firmly partner with DEI practitioners and keep DEI work at the forefront of positive change in their communities.

Perhaps the best advice for Heads about how to partner with DEI practitioners during this crisis was stated candidly by one survey respondent:

- **“Don’t assume anything. ASK US. INVOLVE US.”**



POLLYANNA
Every Voice Matters.