

CHAPTER ONE

Working on the Dream

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal. . . . I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963),
U.S. civil rights leader

This book is based on research we have done, on research others have done, and on our experiences in our own careers as educators. The goal of this book is to provide advice for school leaders and educators who want to develop schools that are both equitable *and* excellent. By equitable and excellent, we mean schools in which literally all students achieve high levels of academic success, regardless of any student's race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language.

For us, leadership for equity and excellence is a call for educators to continue to work on achieving the "dream" that

2 LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Martin Luther King referred to in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. This speech was delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. In this speech, Dr. King said,

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

In education, as in other areas of our social life, the dream that Martin Luther King was referring to—the dream for equity in our country—has not yet been achieved. However, “in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment,” it is extremely important that we continue to hold fast to this dream, that we continue to work hard to make it come true in education. That is what this book is about. It is about how to create schools in which the dream of equity comes alive on an everyday basis through the work of ordinary, everyday people, just like you and us.

In striving for both equity *and* excellence, we are aiming to create schools in which virtually all students are learning at high academic levels. We are aiming for schools in which there are no persistent patterns of differences in academic success or treatment among students grouped by race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language. In other words, we are aiming to foster schools that literally serve each and every student really well.

Let us illustrate what we mean. Suppose you are the principal or a teacher in an elementary or secondary school serving children who are diverse by race, income of parents, culture, home language, and so forth. Suppose almost all of your students are at or above grade level in their academic achievement. Suppose your school achieved this not by drill and kill, not by becoming a test prep factory (i.e., spending the

whole school year teaching to a state accountability test), but by having staff, parents, and students work together to learn how children in your school can be successfully taught.

Thus, in your school, the middle-class children do not do better academically than the children of low-income parents. The white children do not do better than the children of color. In your school, virtually all children achieve at high levels, and there is no discernable difference in academic success among different groups of students. Your school, in short, is what we mean by an equitable and excellent school.

However, we understand that many people, including educators and school leaders, do not believe that such schools are possible. We know this. We run into it constantly as we speak in various venues all across the country. Many, many people—including university scholars, campus and district administrators, and classroom teachers—just don't believe it is possible to create schools that are both equitable and excellent.

This disbelief, this resistance to the very possibility of equity, reminds us of many other situations in which, at first, people did not believe that something was possible, but then some people decided that it was; they then did "the impossible," eventually making the achievement ordinary. Not too long ago, many people believed that women could not succeed in college and become doctors, lawyers, jet pilots, or CEOs of major corporations, but women hold all of these positions today (certainly not as commonly as we would want, but more commonly than before).

Not too long ago, if you had told people that in less than ten years something like the Internet would exist and that people all over the world would routinely use it, people would have said you had been watching too much *Star Trek*. Similarly, not too long ago, many people did not believe that any child of color could be at the top of his or her class, but today this happens frequently, and it happens in some of the best schools in the country. At some point, people decide that they can succeed at what others had commonly, firmly

4 LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

believed was not possible—and they figure out how to do so. In fact, it seems like we spend much too much time saying that we can't do something or that it is too hard, when human history is full of examples of people creating new things that change the way we all think and change society as a whole.

We would like to suggest, then, that we as educators are spending too much time resisting the possibility that we can create both equitable and excellent schools. We would like to suggest that this limited way of thinking is not the truth; it is just a currently common social belief that can be changed. We would like to suggest that if educators would stop this resistance, stop saying that we can't create such schools and, instead, decide that we can, then we could use our time and energy to figure out how to do so.

We can be just as creative as anyone else. We can come up with new ideas, new ways of accomplishing educational success. We *know* that we can figure out how to create schools that are both equitable and excellent.

We may have to see that our beliefs and attitudes are partly the cause of some of the problems. We may have to see that we have some biases that are hurting children. We may have to take a tough look at some things we would rather not look at. However, we deeply, strongly, emphatically believe that together we can do this.

Why do we believe this? First, we believe that “can't” is the most destructive verb in an educator's vocabulary. New ideas, creative possibilities, important transformations, great changes—none of these emerge out of “can't.”

Second, we believe that educators are some of the finest people in the world. We are not trying to put any other group of people down. We are just saying that there is not a better group of people in our society. Virtually all educators are driven by a strong desire to serve children. Educators know the importance of education to our children's futures and our country's future. Educators work as hard as or harder than anyone else. We take everyone's children, and we do the best we possibly can to educate all of them. If we were going to

pick a group to lead society in a major step forward toward improving equity in our society, we would choose educators. Not all of us are great, but we are an excellent group upon which to build an exceptional future, an equitable future.

Third, in our work and research, we have repeatedly seen and studied many classrooms, schools, and districts that are both equitable and excellent. We know from direct, personal, and extensive experience that equitable and excellent schools are possible. We also know that schools like these are not just created by a few exceptional people. We know that ordinary, everyday people, just like you and us, have developed and can develop equitable and excellent schools.

Fourth, although it was the right thing to do all along, creating schools that are both equitable and excellent is now virtually a necessity due to quickly changing demographics. The race and ethnicity demographics of this country are changing very rapidly, faster than even many demographers expected. Students of color already dominate our largest cities, where most of our people live, and are rapidly expanding into all the suburbs and exurbs. All of the largest states—New York, Florida, California, Texas, Illinois (where, together, 40% of our population lives)—already have or will soon have students of color as the majority. For example, the majority of students in Texas schools are already children of color, and by about 2020, two-thirds of the entire Texas population will be people of color. One of every two children in Texas public schools participates in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, and one in every seven children has limited English proficiency. The other large states are on a similar trajectory.

This means that high percentages of the new worker population already are young women and men of color. This, in turn, means the economy, especially of the large states (which have a disproportionate influence on the national economy), will soon be directly dependent on how successful we are in educating children of color. In other words, the success of our society will soon be directly dependent on our ability as educators to be successful with children of color, with whom

6 LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

we have not been very successful in the past. Consequently, if we want our society to move forward in a positive way, both socially and economically, we must become much more successful with children of color than we have been to date. We explicitly have no other choice.

Fifth, creating equitable, excellent schools has unquestionably been the right thing to do from the beginning. This is the point of what Dr. Martin Luther King was talking about. We must all work hard to realize the dream. We must make it come true. We say we live in a democracy; we say we are proud of our democracy; we say the rest of the world ought to have democracy, too, but inequity by race, ethnicity, culture, home language, and so forth exists in our schools. This inequity directly undermines our claim to be an exemplary democracy. In response, we are suggesting that it is we educators who must make the dream of an equitable democracy come true. Educators today *are*, as Robert Moses (2002) suggested, the frontline civil rights workers in a long-term struggle that started with the birth of this country. Decade by decade, people have fought to increase equity for people of color, for people with different cultures and home languages, and for people in low-income families.

Today, this fight, this struggle, this civil rights work has come to us as educators. Rather than walking in demonstrations or doing sit-ins at lunch counters or being arrested for our beliefs, we must carry forth this civil rights struggle on a day-to-day basis in single classrooms and single schools in every state.

This exalted work, this great and wonderful struggle, has been handed to us. It is not a burden; it is a gift. It is a true gift that we are in this place at this time. It is a gift to be an important part of something that is highly valuable, that has tremendous implications for society.

We honor those who participated in the great changes of the past in this country. We honor Martin Luther King and the civil rights workers. We honor Cesar Chavez and the civil rights workers who stood beside him in his efforts for migrant

workers. We honor all the men and women who have stood up and made our society better, who have increased the dignity, value, and equity of all people. Now, it is *we* who must become those same kinds of people. It is up to us to carry the great dream to fruition.

Sixth, this is spiritually the right thing to do. Virtually all people believe that we are all created equal. Virtually all religions believe that we are equally the children of God or the Great Spirit or the Creator or whatever word, name, or phrase you prefer. It is very simple: If you believe in spirituality, you can't believe that inequity by race, ethnicity, social class, culture, or home language is acceptable. Personally, we believe that it is our spiritual duty as educators to create schools that are equitable; schools that serve literally all children really well; schools that respect, appreciate, care for, and love each and every child.

To summarize, then, our reasons for creating schools that are both equitable and excellent are the following: First, "can't" is not allowed; together we can figure this problem out; it *is* a challenge we can meet. Second, we as educators are the people, the new civil rights workers, who can bring this dream to fruition. Third, we have seen and researched schools that are equitable and excellent, and, thus, we know that ordinary, everyday people, just like you and us, can accomplish this. Fourth, our changing demographics demand that we accomplish this if we want a successful national future, both economically and socially. Fifth, creating a truly equitable democracy is the right thing to do. It is the fulfillment of democracy. Sixth, spiritually, we have a sacred duty to accomplish this work.

WHAT WE WILL COVER IN THE BOOK

The next chapter, Chapter 2, is about vision and beliefs. It focuses on learning to believe in the possibility of creating schools that are both equitable and excellent, and it explores the barriers to believing this. Chapter 3 covers standards and

8 LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

curriculum. More specifically, the focus in this chapter is on the use of standards and curriculum in providing leadership for equity and excellence.

Chapter 4 is on instruction and classroom climate. However, the purpose of the chapter is not to provide detailed “how-to” instructions on various techniques, like collaborative grouping. There are plenty of good books and articles that already do that. Instead, we focus simultaneously on some areas that we think teachers are not getting sufficient exposure to and practices that we have found to be particularly important to creating equitable and excellent schooling. Nonetheless, even in these latter areas, we do not provide detailed instructions. Rather, we try to provoke your thinking and to include some readings to get you started on other resources.

Chapter 5 focuses on accountability and appropriate use of data. Chapter 6 covers systemic inequities and using data to uncover and erase them. Chapter 7 is about school leadership and its constant improvement. Chapter 8 focuses on what we call “proactive redundancy.” Chapter 9 centers on parents, community, and context. Chapter 10 is our final call to everyone—including ourselves.

Our primary goal, as we seek to create schools that are both equitable and excellent, is to serve all of our children really well, regardless of their differences. We want to help create outstanding schools in which virtually all children are highly successful. We think any goal that is less than this sells our children short, sells ourselves short, and sells short the dream for a truly equitable society.