

“Equality for Every Person in Oregon and Leading with a Prioritized Equity Stance”

by Director Colt Gill, the Oregon Department of Education, State Equity Summit, Fall 2018.

We will only reach equality for every person in Oregon by providing equity for every child, while at the same time leading with a prioritized equity stance. Today we have an unprecedented opportunity, which I see as a responsibility, to take actions that can positively impact generations of Oregonians and far outlast our time. This is an opportunity that I have not seen come together previously.

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Educators and leaders of the dominant race and culture are just beginning to recognize the impact of white privilege, male privilege, and the oppression, marginalization, and discrimination of many members of our communities that has occurred over generations and continues today. I have a sense of urgency to seize the opportunity and take on the responsibility to act, to right some wrongs, and to be inclusionary in culturally sustaining ways. Ways that don't require assimilation into a dominant culture. This opportunity or responsibility to realize an appreciation for diversity in Oregon, for full inclusion of all people, and for equity to be the norm rather than the exception in our systems, will take a tremendously deep dive to accomplish. It is easy to wish for, and it can seem even within reach.

In my *white* skin, it is even easy to *hope* for. I care deeply about this opportunity, but clearly, in my skin the stakes are not the same as they are for many other people across our state. To successfully achieve this responsibility, we each must start with our individual stance. We must take a deep look at how each one of us come at this and commit to it as individuals. There is risk for everyone who takes on this work. The risk is greater for some, and that can mean that others, sometimes those who carry less risk, need to take bolder actions, blaze a trail, and provide cover. When we start with our individual reflection and stance, we realize our individual responsibility, and we can place it collectively with others to move this work forward.

In order to be of service to all of you in this effort, I have to first look at myself. And, I believe for each of you to be of service to this collective effort, you have to first look at yourself. I have to define for myself, *how do I come at this work?* And I also must ask myself, *what is my responsibility to Oregon's students, families, and educators? How will I develop the courage required to fulfill that responsibility in our state? How will I go about leading with a prioritized equity stance?*

So first, how do I come at this work? I'm white. I'm male. I'm old. I was born in Oregon. I grew up in Oregon. I went to public schools, community college, and university, all in Oregon. I went to work in our public schools right after college. And, I have been doing that work in a predominantly white culture system with predominantly white coworkers. I've been an educator here for 30 years, sometimes a part of the solutions and often a player in a system that oppresses others.

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In looking back at my own school experience, I found a picture of my second grade class in Springfield, Oregon. It was in the 70's, and based on what we were wearing I can tell you, it is obvious that we had a pretty cool sense of fashion. But, you can see also that this is an overwhelmingly white class, with a super nice white teacher, who later became a white co-worker of mine. This is my experience; however, there are a few things you can't see in the photo. I was from a family of hippies in a conservative community. I was identified with a learning disability and didn't really begin to learn to read until third grade. While these are differences, they cannot begin to compare with the experiences of students of color in our schools today.

A second grade class in Springfield looks completely different today than it did 25 years ago. First, add about 8 more students to this teacher's responsibilities. And then, let's diversify; about one third of this class would be students of color, 70% navigating poverty, 17% SWD, 11% emerging bilinguals (14 different languages), many students are also facing adversity, 15% mobile students, 18% chronically absent, and several students in this class today would have experienced adverse conditions during their early childhood. Some may have separated parents, some may be hungry or neglected, some have severe drug and alcohol abuse in their homes, at least some of the students of color would be part of a community of people discounted, pushed aside, and systematically discriminated against over generations by their own neighbors, some may be witnessing or experiencing violence in their homes, and some don't have homes at all.

So, I keep going back to the question, *what is my responsibility to Oregon's students, families, and educators? How will I develop the courage required to fulfill that responsibility in our state?* When Governor Brown asked me to lead our education system, first I had to pick myself up off the floor and attempt to look stable and ready for this responsibility. Then I had to confront some truths and truly consider my ability to be the leader Oregon's children and educators need today. I had to determine if I could be the one that could take advantage of the bold leadership around equity that is promoted by our governor and others. The system I grew up in is very different from the system I'm serving – in more ways than I already demonstrated. The system I grew up in did not talk about race or ethnicity or tribal sovereignty or gender or sexual orientation. We did not really talk about poverty or disability. And, we did not experience much diversity. By comparison today we are far more diverse (although sometimes that diversity is not recognized by all) and, I would charge, that as a system we are not more equitable in significant ways.

Today we can easily recognize racial inequities. We can see evidence in gaps – opportunity gaps, achievement gaps, access gaps, instructional gaps, learning gaps, and sadly even worthiness gaps that attack the core of the children in our schools. We also see evidence of inequities related to gender, sexual orientation, disability, tribal status, geographic location, socioeconomic status and more.

We need to think about intersectionality of these identities for our students, families and staff members. Intersectionality is the interconnection of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender that create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of the prejudices they face on a daily basis.

The issues for our children are clear. Generations of Oregon children are overlooked or even harmed by our system. And, we

will never reach the outcomes we hope for as a state without recognizing the populations of children we are discounting in our system. There is no denying that a large part of this responsibility now lies with me. I came into this business as a classroom teacher. I suspect like all of you, I just wanted to support and serve children. The idea that I'm part of a biased system, in my case leading that system, which is hurting some students is abhorrent.

This realization that many of us share at our core about serving children as our professional or life's purpose is the key to developing my courage. I have one other realization that shores my courage in this work. People in our state (and in most states) do not last long in positions like mine. It is a political reality. However, this reality also gives me permission to be bold to fight for work that

matters, knowing my ability to serve in this position is a true privilege, but also that my days in this role are realistically numbered, it adds to the urgency to make a lasting difference now.

I know the challenge of taking on and undoing inequities in schools feels daunting. And, it can seem too difficult to address meaningfully. But, I think when we get deeply honest, when we look carefully at the responsibilities in each of our roles, when we embrace the concepts of diversity, inclusion and equity as a lens through which we take on each decision, we are better prepared to look at and address the variety of ways that inequities play out in schools. I'd like to borrow a quote from a couple of Oregon equity leaders, Carmen Xiomara Urbina, Elaine Rector, and Dr. Carlos Sequeira, who said, "A focus on equity does not come with a position or title. It is rather a way of being that demonstrates care and concern for making a difference and challenging the status quo."

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I believe in this statement. It speaks to all of us, and we can all share a piece of the responsibility. We can all challenge our current system. I'll say it one more time, *a focus on equity does not come with a position or title. It is rather a way of being that*

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demonstrates care and concern for making a difference and challenging the status quo. Now, I also believe those of us with titles and positional power like teacher, principal, superintendent, director, school board member, legislator, carry the same and an added responsibility, a responsibility to clear the path for others in this work, to create cover, and to open our systems to change that supports *each* of the children we serve.

My role clearly carries this added responsibility, which again begs the question, *how will I go about leading with a prioritized equity stance?* First, while I often feel like a rookie in this work, I have to remind myself that I have been in it for years. Over 25 years ago as a teacher I was part of a team that helped create Oregon's second Racism Free Zone School. And, you can google “Bethel and Genderbread man” and see a series of accurate and inaccurate reports that made national news as we tried to be inclusive to all our families. And, just recently I authored an op-ed that garnered both some love and some threat mail. All this to remind me of three features that are key in my personal equity stance.

First, my equity work will evolve over time, I will always have more to learn. Secondly, I learn by listening carefully, being curious and honoring the voices of those with experiences and identities different from mine. And finally, I must remember to remain humble in this work, understanding that I can always take my knowledge and action to a deeper level - allowing myself to be vulnerable in the effort.

It is easiest for my equity stance to be limited to those three features. However, the pillars I lean on for courage in this work drive the final three features of my personal equity stance, which are to (1) act on the learning with (2) urgency and (3) persistence. To act on the learning with urgency and persistence. Not only my personal equity stance but *personal* stances of many others are what's driving the spirit of equity in our work and driving specific actions in a collective way. This spirit can help us to steal back the term equity, which has so often been compromised, to drive initiatives that directly support individual students and reduce discrimination. To quote Dr. Pedro Noguera, “We can make change for equity for students before policy tells us to.” This is true of each one of us. We can all take action before any state law, rule, or policy tells us to. We can find ways to support all students, each and every one of them, and we can do this work today.

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