

A Call to Teach for Equity

“Beyond the math, the reading, the science, the grammar, Elaine wanted her students to learn that they were part of a community. She wanted them to experience the sharing and the intimacy and the trust that can develop in a group. She wanted them to experience the joys of belonging, really belonging. She wanted them to understand that the learning they struggled so hard to achieve had a purpose, and the purpose was to help not just themselves, but also others.” (Bob Katz, Elaine’s Circle¹)

Welcome!

Teaching for Equity is for elementary teachers and teacher leaders, school administrators and specialists, teacher educators, school families, and school advocates who work to find or create a more just and equitable elementary school experience for students.

Teaching for Equity is about returning teaching and learning to the primary relationships between teacher and student, student and student, school and family.

Teaching for Equity speaks to what we can do individually and together to bend the arc of elementary education more toward the positive energy, spirit, creativity, and innate capacity of each child to gain mastery in essential social and academic skills and content. This is knowledge aimed at the fullest realization of their unfolding potential during their elementary years, as they begin to decide what is important to create in their lives—including nurturing their capacity to contribute to the good of the group.

Teaching for Equity is about approaches for eliminating the learning opportunity gap for children whose experience each year

in elementary school often leaves them further and further behind their peers. All students ought to have the human and material resources they need so that equitable results are attainable.

We have written *Teaching for Equity* because we believe in you. We trust your intelligence, diligence, and compassion. We hold great hope that a new generation of diverse elementary teachers and leaders will join with veteran colleagues to move the agenda for equality of outcomes rapidly forward in the schools where you lead and teach.

Our experience

The authors of this book have witnessed the staggering costs and consequences of inequity for children and families over the last half-century, despite the best efforts of many. We have worked through eras of open education, pushed-down curriculum, back-to-basics instruction, developmentally-appropriate practices, whole-school reform initiatives, standards-based teaching, No Child Left Behind, data-driven instruction,² 21st Century skills, and now Common Core Standards and the dawn of national testing. We have provided professional development in constructivist education, social and emotional learning, arts integration, multicultural education, child development, reflective practice, democratic classroom management practices, and leadership.

We shared common purpose with thousands for a national education agenda that would level the educational playing field for all, and we have seen, instead, widening learning gaps that primarily impact students living in poverty and students of color.³ Models of instruction feature external modes of assessments, standardized practice for standardized testing, and sorting, classifying, and isolating students, teachers, and schools by performance on standardized tests. All of these practices have not worked to close the so-called “achievement gap.”

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Data Collection Report for the 2011-12 school year, released on March 21, 2014, scathingly defined the scale of the gap. The report offered “the first comprehensive look at civil rights data from every public school in the country in nearly 15 years.

“...This data collection shines a clear, unbiased light on places that are delivering on the promise of an equal education for every child and places where the largest gaps remain. In all, it is clear that the United States has a great distance to go to meet our goal of providing opportunities for every student to succeed, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said.”⁴ (See endnotes for access to a report statement.)

Some say education is the civil rights issue of our time. Robert Moses, of the Algebra Project, says children are the civil rights issue of this century. “In the 21st Century,” he said, “we need to include the children. They need to have a constitutional right to an education in this country.”⁵

Education for equity

The Origins Program: Education for Equity, headquartered in Minneapolis, has been working since 1979 to provide teachers and schools around the country at the elementary and middle school levels with high quality professional development for classroom teaching focused on arts-infusion and multicultural approaches to learning how to read, write, understand and utilize scientific and mathematical thinking, how to work collaboratively, to participate democratically in sharing each other’s strengths and resources; how to make school a rich part of life, not just a preparation for it.

The Origins Program’s *Developmental Designs* approach helps secondary educators integrate academic, social, and emotional teaching and learning. This book introduces *Elementary Designs* approaches, created with and for elementary educators.

In every format of *Elementary Designs* professional development—workshops, publications, and consulting—the teacher assesses the needs of his or her students, designs the schedule for the day, and modifies it to suit individual students. Standards guide curriculum, of course; our goal is to help educators modify curriculum so that students can master the skills and content knowledge they need to grow from success to success. There is no autopilot in the cockpit of a classroom! As author and educator Salman Kahn writes, “You can standardize curricula, but you can’t standardize learning.”⁶