NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

Framing Equity Conversations More Equitably

As leaders for equity, it is critical that we build our skill in raising and discussing educational inequities in ways that engage, provoke, and inspire ourselves and others to meaningful action. *How* we talk about educational inequity, the words we choose, the stories that we elevate, matter. If we are not thoughtful and intentional, our efforts to raise awareness about inequities can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to harmful narratives about our students and families. This may not be our intention, however, given the history of inequality and systemic oppression in our country and in our communities, our language choices can trigger conscious and unconscious biases about students of color or students living in poverty.

Guiding Principles
● Remember that it is not about your *intentions* in terms of the language you use, but about how the language you use is *experienced* by various people and groups of people
● Context matters when talking about race. Who is speaking and to whom matters when choosing appropriate and respectful language. This means, as leaders for equity, we will need to navigate ambiguity and stay engaged in active learning and self-reflection to determine the most respectful, humanizing, and liberatory ways to talk about and address inequities.
● If you are unsure how to refer to someone or a group of people; ask them! (Build trusting cross-race relationships where this kind of conversation can happen.)
● Use language that humanizes
● Avoid language that reinforces an us/them paradigm
● Avoid labeling and "othering" language -- Use language that emphasizes people's humanity and calls out oppressive actions ("students we have marginalized versus marginalized students)
● Use specifics; move beyond generalities
● Use language and stories that situate current inequities in a historical, policy context; acknowledge that the current inequitable conditions and outcomes are the result of our specific federal, state, and local policies and practices
● Use language and stories that elevate the performance and achievements of all groups of students and specifically students who we have underserved or who are situated furthest from opportunity in our communities

Below are some examples of potentially problematic ways of framing and talking about inequities and alternative language that shifts the narrative to a more honest, culturally responsive, and liberatory discourse.

Problematic Framing (potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes)	More Equitable/Liberatory Framing
Achievement Gap (*tacitly places focus on the students as the problem rather than problematizing the access students have had or not had to opportunities they need to "achieve"; also assumes we have agreement about what counts as "achievement"*)	● Opportunity gap (acknowledges that there is nothing wrong with our students, the problem we are trying to solve is not "fixing" a group of students, but ensuring that every student gets the support they need to thrive; directs our attention to historic and current structural inequities) ● Paying back an education debt, Ladson-Billings (acknowledges that a quality education has been denied to many groups of students to varying degrees historically and currently based on gender, race, income, language, etc.)
Disadvantaged Students (*labels a group of students with a negative term; tacitly reinforces the idea that there is something "disadvantaged" about who the students or their families are, does not identify who or what has "disadvantaged" them*)	● Students we are not yet serving well ● Students we are serving least well ● Students who have been structurally cut-off from opportunity ● Students situated farthest from opportunity in our community or in our school ● Students/communities whom we have marginalized (rather than marginalized students)
Low-achieving/Underperforming Students (*labels a group of students with a negative term; communicates "low-achieving" as an attribute of a student, reinforces fixed mindset, communicates all/nothing when it is likely that students are strong in some areas and need more development in others and this changes over time*)	● Students whose academic needs we have not met yet ● Students who are not yet performing at their capacity ● Students who have not yet received the support they need to succeed on this metric ● Students who do not have access to the opportunities they need to learn, grow, and thrive

"Compared to their White Counterparts" (*Tacit in this comparison is the belief that the "goal" is to emulate white students; as if the level of achievement of white students is the ceiling or "the way" of achievement. Reinforces white superiority.*)	● Describe patterns of achievement in terms of where students are relative to a universal goal (not compared to other student groups) ● Compared to students with more access to resources.
"Compared to White and Asian Counterparts" (*Reinforces the idea that Asian students' realities/experiences are relevant to the discussion only in relationship to/proximity to whiteness. Unnecessarily homogenizes distinct groups.*)	● Disaggregate data to de-center whiteness ● Learn about and lift up the distinct experience of different groups of Asian American students in our communities
Minority Students (*Can trigger negative associations, over-generalizes and groups together disparate and unique groups, reinforces us/them paradigm.*)	● Be specific about which student or students you are referring to; ● Think about whether you mean "African American" or "Latinx" and consider whether naming majority/minority is actually useful or needed for your purposes
"Diverse Students" (*this term does not have real meaning, individual students are not "diverse"; often used euphemistically when we mean students of color or specific groups, e.g., African American, Latinx, Chinese American, etc.*)	● Be specific about which students or group of students you are referencing
"At risk" students (locates the problem in an adjective describing something about the students with no "actor" or verb)	● Shift to something that draws our attention to the *conditions* that need to be addressed to minimize or mitigate vulnerability, e.g.,: ○ "students we have persistently cut off from opportunity in our community/communities…." ○ "students who we have put at greater risk through our policies, practices, and ways of working…." ○ "students who are at greater risk because they are situated furthest from opportunity in our community…"

"Sub-groups" *(sub means "below" and reinforces lower status)*	● This is common data language, however, when a leader refers to students in their district as "sub-populations" - it is problematic because of the explicit and implicit harmful associations it can trigger
Binary Language (boys and girls, he/she)	● Respect how each individual chooses to identify and use non-binary language that is inclusive of how the myriad ways gender is expressed