

## Creating Culturally Affirming Spaces: A Systems Orientation

ERIN BROWDER

Hello, everyone. Welcome. Thank you for joining us today. Happy Wednesday. Awesome. Well, we have such an exciting lineup for you all today. I'm going to go ahead and get us kicked off as folks get in and get settled. There's something for everyone one here. On behalf of REL West at WestEd, I'd like to welcome everyone and thank you for joining us this afternoon. Welcome to the second webinar of a two-part webinar series on Creating Culturally Affirming Spaces.

My name is Erin Browder, and I work as a Senior Program Associate at WestEd. I'm happy to be here as a facilitator and content lead on this series, and I'm joined by my REL West colleagues, who will shortly introduce themselves. During the first session, which is posted on Facebook that we can link for folks who may not have caught that, we focused on what culturally affirming spaces look like in schools and classrooms. Today, we will talk about systems-level approaches on the district level and/or the school level, ways that we can cultivate culturally affirming spaces and conditions for success. For those of us in this work, we know that this is not the work of one person, one school, or one leader, no matter what their extraordinary capabilities and superpowers are as they relate to culturally responsive practices. This is a collective, shared effort that has both individual and collective responsibilities.

Today's webinar will be structured into two parts. One, where our REL West staff will situate research and context, and then we will invite our panelists to share more about their experiences, their expertise, and their skills in the field. We have an incredible panel of recognized leaders, practitioners, and researchers who are experts in their crafts and individually and collectively bring unique perspectives to this work about how we can build and contribute to positive systems change that honor and value the diversity of our students. There are a couple things to note as we get started.

One is that we situate this idea, this notion of culturally affirming spaces as a voice of a larger conversation around culturally responsive and sustaining education. This conversation includes concepts like racial equity, equitable systems, cultural competence, etc. While these terms do not have the same definitions, nor should they be conflated, they work in relationship with each other and help us build a more full and vivid picture of what is needed to support the social-emotional and academic wellbeing of the students we serve so that they can do more than just survive, to quote Bettina Love.

The lens of culturally affirming spaces helps us envision an outcome or a setting of where we see culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and racially diverse students and staff feel seen and valued. To note, the chat will remain open throughout our webinar, and we'd like for you to use it as an

opportunity to interact with other audience members. We are going to ask that you refrain from messaging individuals on the panel or facilitators and that you do not share personal information. During our part two, we will ask for questions that we can pose to our panelists, but we already have a set of questions, so we ask for your flexibility. So, as we get started, let's set an intention for our time here. Whether you're here to learn something new, be in a community with like minds, you're just curious, or you're making connections with something you're already doing, I invite you to take a deep breath and sit with that intention as we get started.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

And a bit about the Regional Education Laboratory West, or REL West, we are the sponsor of today's webinar. There are ten regional labs across the country, and our goal is to promote the use of data and research evidence to inform policy and practice. We work with educators and policymakers to support evidence-based, equitable education systems. And our presenter team today, we have the same team of presenters from our first webinar to share the research background on culturally affirming school systems. That team includes Erin Browder, whom you've met, David Lopez, Rawlin Rosario. They are all part of the Talent Development and Diversity team here at WestEd.

Members of this team work directly with the social educational agencies (SEAs), districts, and schools, providing professional learning, technical assistance, and resources to develop and retain an effective, culturally responsive, and racially and linguistically diverse educator workforce. They also provide technical assistance, evaluation services, and research that increase educators' and leaders' use of policies and practices that promote equitable learning outcomes for each student.

And now, our panelists. In addition to our REL West and WestEd presenters, we're really excited to have with us five panelists from across the country with deep knowledge and diverse experiences in supporting and leading culturally, racially, socially, and linguistically just education systems. On our panel, we have Dr. Ayana Allen-Handy, Dr. Ayanna Cooper, who was with us for the first webinar as well, Dr. Rosa Perez Isiah, Jabari Lyles, and Reed Swier. They will each get a chance to tell a bit more about their work and who they are when we move to panel discussion. But I'll share a bit here to whet your appetite. They all started their careers in the classroom, and they continue to teach in one way or another today.

They are passionate advocates for systems change, for youth, for social justice, and for creating culturally affirming systems, schools, and classrooms. These are nationally known professionals who get their message out in a multitude of ways. They author books and articles, they host podcasts, they write blogs, they do TED Talks, they provide professional learning, and they gift us with their knowledge and experience in events like this. We're grateful that they're here today, and we'll hear much more about them and from them in the second half of the webinar.

RAWLIN ROSARIO

Welcome, everyone. My name is Rawlin Rosario from WestEd. I'm very excited to be with this community once again. For today's webinar, our objectives remain the same. We're going to deepen our understanding of culturally affirming school and classroom cultures and climates and how they shape student and staff outcomes. We're going to explore systemic approaches for embedding culturally affirming spaces and practices at the school and district level. And lastly, we're going to learn about promising leadership practices and adult behaviors that foster culturally affirmative schooling experiences from practitioners in the field. And we're going to go ahead and start off with the research, as Lori mentioned. We're going to talk about culturally affirming spaces, but this time with a real focus on systems orientation. We'll review session one core concepts, talk about systems culture and barriers, and end with culturally responsive leadership competencies and behaviors. The main event of this webinar, as you all know, will be our panel discussion around creating systems and systemic culture that are culturally affirming for culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. After the panel, we'll have a chance to do some Q&A with our amazing panelists and then close out. To start off, we wanted to pose this question, who's on the webinar? We invite you to respond to the following questions.

What is your role? And how familiar are you with culturally affirming practices at the systems level, at the school level? If you do not see your role, please feel free to type it into the chat. We have some school-based educators here, about 13%. I see some district-based administrators, around 20%, as well, and we have a few people from community-based organizations, about 2%. And we have quite a significant number of researchers or technical assistance providers, with 30%. And I see in our chat, we have anywhere from architects, to ideologists, to New York State Department of Education members, to child development consultants. So, we have quite a broad range of participants here today. And then, our second question, as you can see in the results, it seems that most of us are just learning and not familiar with culturally affirming practices. Some of us are in between, but that just means that we'll be learning and sharing a lot of information today. Thank you all for participating. And please continue to share responses and questions in the chat.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Rawlin. Thank you for setting up this space. So, we wanted to make sure at the top of our session, we had a brief recap of some of the core concepts that we discussed in session one. I'm going to ask, Del, can you go to the next slide? And I'll share a little bit about how we conceptualized or understood how culture shows up and is expressed inside of our schools. We started with an opening activity that asked folks, "In what ways do we see, hear, and feel culture in schools?" And as a neat way to put you in interaction or engagement with the Webinar 1 participants, I captured some of their responses in the chat. So, some of the responses we got were, how we see culture in schools would be the way people interact with each other, the way our students engaged, their relationships, the holidays that are celebrated, the colloquialisms

that we hear, the language that is spoken, the music that we hear, the stories students tell, artwork, and so forth.

We were really able to honor an expansive view of culture, one that's situated race in the center, as race in our society is prevalent and salient in the ways we behave, the ways we understand and see the world, the ways that the world experiences ourselves as well, but is also inclusive of other rings of culture, such as gender culture, age culture, youth culture, and religious culture. And it's really important that we start in this space because oftentimes, we see race being conflated with culture. When we lump the two together, we miss all of the ways that opportunities — that we can validate and affirm student culture, and then ways that we invalidate student culture. The ways that we might pass a judgment or devalue in a sense that it doesn't echo a heteronormative value, what we might see in the dominant culture that is pervasive inside of the schools and the systems. That being said, we also wanted to make sure that we centered back on how we're situating and explaining defining culturally affirming spaces.

So culturally affirming spaces. Schools and classrooms where adult practices, behaviors, and policies thoroughly acknowledge and proactively seek to affirm students' cultural identities and multifaceted cultural assets as integral to students' positive self-concept, academic and social wellbeing, while working to reduce harm and microaggressions experienced by students and families of color. And this is happening in real time. This is an emerging field or body of work that we're starting to hear a lot about. It's a term that we're starting to hear as we think about educator diversity and knowing the importance of culturally affirming spaces to recruit and retain educators of color.

I'm reading through some of your responses. Love the focus on adult practices, the reduction of harm. So, what we see in this understanding is that culturally affirming spaces, what they are and what they aren't, they are spaces where we're proactively seeking ways of affirming and validating our students' cultural identities. And what they aren't is this prevalence of harm and microaggressions that students of color experience every day in our classrooms and our schools. We hold both of those truths at the same time, knowing that when we're able to focus on one, we're still tending to the unconscious ways that we might microaggress our students or each other.

As we are going to venture into this world of beliefs and how beliefs really form the deep structure of how our systems are organized, how we communicate and engage with each other, I also want to introduce what a culturally affirming belief is. We identify these beliefs, but it's about replacing them. So, here's one. It is, cultural assets are resources for new learning and meaning making. What might it look like if we had practices, policies, structures that really centered these cultural assets and helped us make new connections with the people in the world around us? I will walk us through this definition. Because just as we explore through the culturally affirming spaces understanding what they are and aren't, we also need to have a deeper, shared understanding of what microaggressions are. This comes from two sources.

Microaggressions are brief and commonplace, daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages, slights, and insults towards people with marginalized identities and deniable acts of discrimination on the basis of false or pathological stereotypes about marginalized groups.

That's a really big and complex definition. I'm just going to pause here. Who defines intentional or unintentional? And that really gets to that part of this definition, the deniable acts of discrimination. Because the folks most able to articulate that experience are the ones also experiencing the microaggression. And there's an analogy that we hear in the field of microaggressions being like paper cuts. And so, our students, moving throughout their day, all the different cuts—and the truth is, as someone who experiences microaggressions, it does not feel like a paper cut.

Oftentimes, it feels worse than a paper cut. Another thing I want to highlight, we will talk about racial microaggressions, and microaggressions can occur from a number of identities. So, it's inclusive of race, but it also includes language. It includes nativism, like, "You're not from here, so you can't speak on this." It includes gender. It includes religion. The marginalized identities are pretty pronounced here. And in our first webinar, we do break down microaggressions and talk about the different ways that they're experienced, and we invite you to check that out.

And so, as we think about our students and their wellbeing, their academic, social-emotional wellbeing, their positive self-concept, we really need to have a firm understanding and grasp of what is the collective impact of daily microaggressions and culturally harmful experiences. And what you see here are these three main categories. Internalized evaluation. "I can't do this." Feeling unaccomplished. "I don't do anything well." Low self-esteem, unworthiness. An assaulted sense of self. An unhealthy worldview. Inability or struggle towards goal setting. A narrowed sense of time.

An example I gave last time is, we talked to some of our secondary, even our primary students, and they're like, "Miss, I live for today." They can't even hold an idea of what life would look like for themselves in five, ten years from now. Increased arousal. A basic mistrust of adults and even peers their own age. Internalized voicelessness, not speaking up for themselves. Limited demonstration of agency. Appeasement. That's people-pleasing. Limited emotional expressions.

So, we know that there are a number of factors that can contribute to these outcomes. And this experience inside of schools can heighten any one of ask indicator or category that a student might be experiencing. And the more we become aware, the more we can work to reduce our own contribution to that experience for students as well as helping our colleagues in our schools as a whole. Awesome, thank you. Next slide. So, you all are going to get to hear a lot from me in these first couple slides, which is awesome. Now, we're moving into our systems focus.

And when it comes to systems change, I think all of us are aware of a number of approaches and well-documented practices that can help us build this magical system that we know can exist. If

only it were that simple. If only it were that simple. We have all the tools, the resources, the strategy, the blueprints, and yet we're further away than what we started with. I'd like us all to envision the black box of systems change. That all the neat and organized inputs go in. And when we look at the outputs, we see that that's not really what we signed up for.

Again, further from the outcome than maybe when we first started. The feeling that things are in even more of a disarray. And that's our experience inside of this system. But when we pause and think about who suffers most, we think about our students and families. When our systems are consciously or unconsciously organized around trauma, biased perspectives about students and deficit frames about what students and families can do or have unequal shares of power, so who we listen to, who's directing the changes and initiatives of that district, we start to see systemic harm in daily interactions, and we see it in the data. Additionally, when we dispatch all of our resources and energy into the wrong problem, we find ourselves going in circles and caught in energy traps.

Today, we are going to spend some time in this black box. For the next few minutes, we are going to name and surface some of the complexity of systems change work, acknowledge the deep structures of systems and how it pertains to creating culturally affirming spaces and building a culture of culturally responsive and sustaining practices. During our panel discussion, we will hear examples and strategies of ways that our panelists have seen or implemented system-level changes, the lessons they've learned, the transformative practices they've either been involved in or witnessed, all that work towards developing welcoming and meaningful schooling experiences for our racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students.

That was a lot of talking. Now, it's time to hear from you. Our question for you all is, in what ways do we experience systems and school culture? I see lots of things in here, great. Faculty hiring. Grading and assessment. Family engagement. Rules and procedures. Behavior management systems. The norming of what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. A sense of belonging. What is valued, taught, and tested. The ways we have students get to school, how they travel to classrooms. The pledge of allegiance. Pedagogy. Awesome, thank you. In anticipation of a lot of the responses you have here as well as some we heard in session one, I pre-populated a list that really echoes a lot of what we're seeing in the chat. Some of the ways that we experience systems culture.

The language that's used to describe students and families. Acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. The policies that guide and structure our systems. Funding and resource allocation. Professional development. What is supervised and prioritized. I think we're all on a similar page in terms of how we experience culture inside of our schools and systems. As we move more inside of this conversation, I really want to pull our focus around students.

And what we see here are these four domains provided by the BELE Framework, which is the Building Equitable Learning Environments for Students. And they have categorized these four main domains that center students and that we see inside of our districts and schools that have a lot of overlap as well in terms of staffing and resources. So, there's teaching and learning, the

school culture and school-wide policies, district and state policies, and family and community partnerships. This is the context in which we're operating. So, all of those noticings and ways that we experience culture that we just named live inside of these domains that we see here. And they're all opportunities as we think about what needs to be shifted, changed, what needs to be stopped, started, and continued in terms of supporting culturally affirming spaces for our students.

DAVID LOPEZ

We want to invite you all to consider how you, both as an individual but also collectively, steward and uphold systemic culture in your context.

ERIN BROWDER

And so, if you think back to the four domains that we shared, where does your role sit in those four domains? Teaching and learning, district and school policies, school policies, family and community partnerships. And in that context, how do you as an individual steward the systemic culture that you named? Are you grading students? Are you conducting and facilitating professional learning? And then, as a group, with other folks that you're working with, that you're in community with, as a grade-level team, in what ways are you collectively stewarding systemic culture in your context?

David has transitioned us to think about the role of beliefs in our work. As we're stewarding the systemic culture based on our individual roles inside of a system and the ways that we engage with other folks, what are some of those beliefs that underlie our actions and behaviors? So, leaning into the work of Dr. Edward Fergus, we categorize our biospace beliefs in these three chunks, these three buckets. From color evasiveness, to deficit thinking, to poverty disciplining belief. And I'm actually going to ask Rawlin to read for us the definition of color evasiveness, and I'll just call on different folks to read to kind of break up the voices here.

RAWLIN ROSARIO

Awesome. So, the first biospace belief is color evasiveness, as Erin just mentioned. Here, we see that the dominant racial ideology is based on color evasiveness, where many of us have been conditioned to think that race does not play a factor in people's experiences or social identities are often ignored. So, when I hear, "Oh, well, race is irrelevant, you're just an individual," this creates attention for me. Although this person didn't create racism, the failure to see race obscures racism, and therefore perpetuates it.

ERIN BROWDER

Next, we have our deficit thinking. And I want to say that this is probably one of the more dominant biospace beliefs that a lot of us are aware of that we might hear in other settings or hear folks that we work with who are conveying these types of beliefs, and we might find ourselves unconsciously falling into patterns where we're perpetuating deficit thinking. So, the description here provided by Dr. Richard Valencia is, an ideology used within all levels of



educational systems to explain academic performance as a result of deficiencies within an individual and group. It discounts the presence of systemic inequalities as the result of race-based processes, practices, and policies. The foundation of deficit thinking is genetic pathology and culture of poverty.

So even as I read that, you might be thinking, "Oh, never me. That can't be me." But one thing we'll get into is thinking about how we all adopt the behaviors and are conditioned inside of our systems. Even if we come in thinking something different, it is really easy to fall into patterns of biospace beliefs and language that is frequently used to describe the abilities and identities of our students and their families. And underneath each, we have examples of each of the different types. So, you have students of color from disadvantaged homes just seem to show a lack of initiative. The values and beliefs shared by those in disadvantaged neighborhoods tend to go against school values and beliefs about what makes up a good education. And lastly, poverty disciplining belief. Rawlin, can I pass to you?

RAWLIN ROSARIO

Yes. So, poverty disciplining summed up means that poverty prevents people's success in life. This is the theory here. And as a society, we focus on changing the behaviors and the thinking of individuals from low-income backgrounds, telling them, "You have to act a certain way," or, "You have to be a certain way in order to be successful." And so, we see this take shape in many forms. And I saw some of this in the chat, policies that ban certain hairstyles in schools. And although race may not always be the focus of poverty disciplining, they're often conflated. And another piece here of poverty disciplining really states that poverty causes issues with development in children. And this is just not the case.

ERIN BROWDER

So, one thing that we really want to drive home is a saying we hear a lot in systems change work. And that is, every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. So, when we look at the data, and we see the inequities between the different student groups, we look at aggregated data, we need to ask ourselves, "What are the practices that are contributing to this?" And beneath this surface, what are the beliefs and the policies that are perpetuating, kind of almost greasing the wheel to help us get to those outcomes, however much we don't want them or desire them? Another notion—and this is actually a popular phrase within improvement science and implementation science. I just want to put an asterisk here. What we put in, we get out as well.

When we engage in different processes that are constructed to help us improve and get better, if we don't address the beliefs and some of the deeper structures within us as individuals and within the system as a whole, we can find ourselves still perpetuating that harm using a tool from improvement science or using a tool from implementation science or other strategies. Not to single those out. So, bias in is bias out. We have to name what those are and actively work to replace those bias-based beliefs.



And so, this is really a description of what we've already started to frame for you all. We're all super familiar with iceberg diagrams. And here, we see at the base the strong hull, the foundation are those mental models. The assumptions, beliefs, and values that people hold about the system, within the system, about the communities we serve. What beliefs keep that system in place? Moving up to the policies, how do we communicate those policies? How do we hold our systems together? What is defining the structures, the ways that we engage? What is acceptable language and behaviors inside of our systems? We see that in our policies.

Those inform our procedures, how we get work done. And then, the practices are at the surface. A lot of times, and we'll talk about this when we're talking about common systems barriers, we come up with strategic or structural changes, goals and initiatives. But oftentimes, we're not going deep enough to unearth some of the beliefs that are keeping these alive. As we consider some of the barriers, if we don't go deep, we'll find ourselves running into these. And a lot of these are common. These are things that we see in our work, supporting districts, supporting state agencies.

There's a culture of compliance. You've just got to get it done. Put your head down. We're all on autopilot. Race-neutral or color-evasive approaches. How can we do work towards equity if we aren't looking at disaggregated data? What truths are we not telling to ourselves? Over-reliance on structural or strategic changes and avoiding the mindset and belief work. And this is at all system levels.

You might have senior leaders look to us and say, "I need you to train the folks on the ground." It's a ground-up approach. Misaligned and problematic policies. We'll talk about that shortly. But a lot of times, we see this microaggression, systemic harm, structural racism that lives inside of the policies that are governing the behaviors and practices of the adults in our systems. Fragmented problem-solving, siloed or departments working in isolation. Not regularly looking at disaggregated data. I cannot stress that enough. A lot of times, folks are so busy trying to solve the wrong problem.

They haven't even determined what the right problem is or conducted a root cause analysis. And failing to have a plan to acknowledge blind spots and obstacles that are likely to occur. We are not doing this work in a vacuum. Even here today, our larger community or network of practitioners or educators who are engaged, how are we leveraging our resources, supports, and tools to help us row in the same direction? I want us to hold something in mind.

If we stop at these barriers and these walls, and we don't do the work necessary to move through them, we continue to do what this quote situates for us here. And I'll read it for everyone. Districts in schools serve as conduits of racial microaggressions, for they often transmit sociocultural messages which can perpetuate students' feelings of inferiority, and when internalized at the level of the unconscious, can greatly affect students' wellbeing. So, shifting back to that early slide that talks about the collective or cumulative experience for students who are experiencing daily microaggressions, we see that policies and districts in schools can be the vehicle that transmits these messages of inferiority. And I want to also highlight here, while this

says racial microaggressions, I want to open that up a bit because that also includes gender microaggressions. And language. And different ways that we experience the dominant culture and the invalidation of the inherent culture that our students are bringing in.

Hodgkins and other researchers have framed how K–12 student microaggressive experiences align with structural racism, that it can both be experienced on a structural level and an interpersonal level. So, in our first webinar, we talked about that interpersonal experience, but here, as we think about the policies that govern and shape our systems, how do they materialize the microaggressions and the stereotypes that we have of the students and families that we serve? Thinking about our policies, we know a lot about zero tolerance and discipline policies and the disproportionate impact they have for students. Dress codes. Someone mentioned hairstyles, the CROWN Act. Special education referrals. Teacher evaluation processes. Curriculum and instructional materials.

These are all places, as we're conceptualizing culturally affirming spaces, again, holding what they are and aren't. We have to address how racism and microaggressions live inside of our policies. And we're tasked with doing the work of, what are the beliefs beneath that? Going beneath the surface to reframe and transform what those policies look like, what they sound like, and how they impact our students. I'm going to pause there. There's been a lot of talk. We would love to hear some of the a-ha's that folks might be having who are watching, different things that are resonating with them. How does this quote land for you? We're going to move on and start to move our conversation from this complexity towards the solutions and getting ready to hear from our panelists.

RAWLIN ROSARIO

Thanks, Erin. And so, as Erin said, how do we begin to address these systemic barriers so we can ultimately create culturally affirming environments and spaces for our students and families? Well, the research shows us that one way is through cultivating and strengthening culturally responsive leadership. In his research, Mohamed Khalifa offers powerful examples that show how cultural responsiveness is a necessary component of effective school leadership, and that if cultural responsiveness is to be present and sustainable in our schools, then it has to be consistently promoted by a school or district leader. And as you can see in this graphic, Dr. Khalifa lays out a four set of unique leadership behaviors that characterize culturally responsive leadership.

The first is developing culturally responsive teachers. Leaders are the central driving force oftentimes in instructional leadership and in curriculum development. And they are also accountable for the growth and efficacy of their teachers. And as such, they're positioned to help teachers improve their practice by building teacher capacity, equity mindsets to really address these bias-based beliefs through professional development opportunities and even modeling what culturally affirming behaviors are in their own schools. The next piece here is critically reflecting on one's culturally affirming leadership. Building leaders must understand their own multiple identities before they can help build cultural responsiveness in their teachers

and school with other staff. And these leaders must commit to this continuous learning and self-reflection, while at the same time seeking the voices of students and teachers to really understand how culture is being validated or not throughout their school. The next component is promoting culturally responsive and inclusive school environments.

Leaders should establish shared language for their school and district, a vision for what culturally affirming practices look like. We've talked a lot about this in our webinars. Leaders must be clear. What does this look like? What does this not look like? Leaders must challenge exclusionary policies, teachers, and behaviors while affirming changes that center and respect the identities of our culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse students. And the last piece that Dr. Khalifa really emphasizes for culturally responsive leadership is to engage students, parents, and indigenous contexts.

Aside from building one's own cultural proficiency and encouraging teachers to adopt and use these practices, leaders must include parents and communities in their leadership activities. Community-based histories and perceptions must be at the center of any efforts to overcome systemic barriers. And so, leaders have to find ways to engage communities, to build relationships without perpetuating or reinforcing these bias-based beliefs, these deficit-based policies, and ultimately reproducing oppression in our schools. And so, although his research really focuses on school-building principles, it is important to note that this is not the job of just one person, one group, or one school.

As Erin said earlier, it's about how do we collectively, as a system, grow in the same direction, how do we collectively, as educators, incorporate what we've learned and push a little bit. And so, these are some high-level aspects of what Dr. Khalifa offers. And his full article and framework offer a bit more comprehensive understanding of the behaviors and competencies that culturally responsive leaders should possess. And I know that our panelists will also expand on some of these notions.

So where do we start? How do we begin to disrupt inequities? How do we build culturally affirming environments? On this slide, we just want to offer multiple starting points, recognizing that some of these, as our team on the Talent Development and Diversity at WestEd, we have experience, so we want to highlight a few of these. But also, our panelists will highlight these when they speak. And again, these are not meant to be done alone.

And again, these are not meant to be specifically done in this particular order. But one starting point could be building a task force, a team that initiates this work, that is really intentional about building a team with diverse backgrounds of not just where people come from, but their roles. Analyzing disaggregated data, looking for places to start. And you start analyzing and disaggregating our data, we can really think about root causes and analyzing them to conduct a systemic equity review, to really reflect on what the community needs and what is not being given.

Another starting point could be to utilize self-assessment tools to really calibrate where you are as a team and where you are on your culturally responsive journey, and really help you identify areas for improvement. I think an important starting point as well could be really taking the time to interview those most affected and marginalized. This could be engaging students in youth participatory action research to learn from the lived experiences of the students.

Youth participatory action research really involves the young people themselves gathering information about pressing issues in their schools and communities and advocating for those solutions. And I think lastly, engaging regularly with critical questions that help us to refocus and recenter the work at hand. And some of these can be found in work done from Garmston and Wellman, 2016. And they're three simple questions: *Who are we? Why are we doing this? And why are we doing this this way?* And again, we offer these as starting points to give you all an idea of the types of actions that we can take as collective educators to create truly culturally affirming spaces. Our amazing panelists will talk about one or more of these with more specificity, and I'm sure they'll give you some personal examples of where they may have started.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

So that was a tremendous amount of thought-provoking information about culturally affirming systems, how they show up in schools and districts, the barriers to implementation, and some of the starting places for us. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Before we move to the panel discussion, let's take a second to kind of catch our breath, and to reflect back, and just choose that one piece of information, that tidbit that you heard, that really resonated with you. And make a few notes on that before we move forward. Maybe it's something big like the four categories from the BELE Framework or something from the Khalifa piece.

Maybe it's just one small tidbit that you're going to take with you. Bias in, bias out. So, pick something, consider that insight, reflect on how it sits within that iceberg system diagram. Is it part of the beliefs, the policies, the procedures, or practices in your organization? We are going to jump right into a conversation on creating systems that are culturally affirming for racially, ethnically, linguistically, and gender-diverse students.

Our panelists today, as I mentioned earlier, are Dr. Ayana Allen-Handy, Dr. Ayanna Cooper, Dr. Rosa Perez Isiah, Jabari Lyles, and Reed Swier. We'll be posting some links to their work in the chat and other resources. You can also pose your questions to the panelists in the chat. We will get to as many as we can. But again, we're prioritizing those that are of broadest interest to our participants. Erin and David will serve as the facilitators for the discussion. So, a huge thanks to our panelists.

We're so grateful you're here to share your insights and experience with us. And we'll start with a personal introduction. Each one will take a turn for a few minutes to introduce themselves and to answer our first question, which is, why is this work important to you? And with that, I will turn it over to Dr. Allen-Handy to introduce herself.

AYANA ALLEN-HANDY

Good afternoon, everyone. It's wonderful to be here in sharing this space with you this afternoon. My name's Ayana Allen-Handy. I am a teacher, I am a scholar, I am a researcher, and I'm really, really excited to be in this space. This work, for me, is my life's work, not only as a parent but also as a scholar. I have dedicated the last 20 years as an urban education teacher in Houston for many years, a counselor, and now as a professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia. And for me, the work is personal because I grew up in Philly. So, I'm able to really be back in the space that made me and was so critical to my own development and to really live out what I call my family legacy. So, it's really great to be here, and I'm excited for our discussion today.

AYANNA COOPER

Hi, I'm Ayanna, too. You have Ayanna squared on this call. I'm Ayanna Cooper, I am an educator and Civil Rights activist, a teacher at heart, of course, a researcher. I'm also the author of *And Justice for ELs*, and the co-editor of *Black Immigrants in the United States: Essays on the Politics of Race, Language, and Voice*. And this work, too, is very near and dear to my heart. And for me, it began very early because at five years old, I was assigned the role of Rosa Parks in the school play. I share that because at a very young age, I knew that was an important role, I knew that my parents were very proud that I had the role of Rosa Parks. We had to practice different scenes. I understood injustice and what it meant to treat certain people differently.

So, I say that because I want to remind all of you of how important it is for us to think about the roles that we assign our students in our classrooms and how they can have a lasting impact on their lives. And so, I work alongside school leaders and support their capacity to assure better outcomes for students who identify as English learner or multilingual learner. And I just am looking forward to continuing this conversation this afternoon, this morning. Thank you.

ROSA PEREZ-ISIAH

Hello, everyone. I am simply delighted to be here with you today. I'm Dr. Rosa Perez-Isiah, currently Director of Elementary Equity and Access in the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District in beautiful California, Los Angeles. Recent author of *Beyond Conversations About Race*. I am a speaker, presenter, advocate for voices who are often silenced. And I do this work really for the younger version of me. The young immigrant, multilingual learner, child in poverty, trauma-impacted, first-generation, and for the many, many students out there who are like that. So, the work is personal for me. Very important. Thank you.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you. Gracias. And next, we have Jabari Lyles.

JABARI LYLES

Hey, there. Good afternoon or good morning to some of you. My name is Jabari Lyles. My pronouns are he and him. Coming to you live from Baltimore, Maryland. I've been a champion for LGBTQ rights and inclusion in Baltimore and throughout Maryland for over half of my life. I grew up as a Black queer student in the suburbs of Baltimore, and that was a place where conversations about race, and class, and gender just were not being had. My teachers were not prepared to have those conversations, system leaders were not. Those conversations were tough within my family.

So, I got involved with LGBT inclusion in schools from a very young age, became an elementary, middle, and high school teacher in Baltimore City, a nonprofit leader, and community organizer, and eventually became Baltimore's first ever Director of LGBTQ Affairs for the office of the mayor, where I advised Baltimore's three most previous mayoral administrations on all the things they have to do for gender and sexual inclusion and justice. Today, I'm an independent consultant doing LGBT inclusion and training for K–12 schools as well as nonprofits, businesses, or really, anyone who will listen to me talk. LGBTQ rights are super important to me. It is the life that I live, the air that I breathe, particularly for our young people in schools. So, I'm excited to share my insight with you today.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Jabari. And last, but certainly not least, Mr. Reed Swier.

REED SWIER

Hello, everyone. Good to be here. My name's Reed Swier, he, him, his. I'm an Associate Director of Training and Development at NYU Metropolitan Center for the Research on Equity and Transformation of Schools. I think I got that right. I always have to rethink about that, and I'm in year four over there. But I'm at heart an elementary teacher and an administrator. I come from a line of teachers and social workers out of Michigan and currently reside in Brooklyn, New York.

My work and dedication to this work comes from an everyday and ongoing struggle to reckon with the American context, white supremacist delusion, my own power and privilege, and my impact that I have on the spaces that I navigate and engage with. So, this work is critical in how I step in every day. I appreciate being here, excited to talk through what was already presented to us. And I love it when I can have multiple pages of notes already going into the panel. So, thank you for already sharing so much.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Reed. Excited to get this conversation started. We have so much to talk about with such a short period of time. So, what we've done behind the scenes is kind of assigned questions, but we definitely welcome folks on our panel to jump in, and piggyback, and add to the different things they hear from their colleagues. As Reed alluded to, we've talked about a lot of things so far in our presentation. But we do want to make sure that we spotlight some of the bright spots that we see in the field, some of the examples of leadership and system-level beliefs and behaviors that foster culturally affirming practices.

So, this first question is going to be a twofer, and that is that you share an example of either a leadership practice or a system-level belief or behavior that you have seen personally or have facilitated that fostered a culturally affirming practice. And if you have connections or reflections to the information you heard in the first section, we'd love for you to include or make those connections as well. And we're going to get started with Dr. Perez-Isiah.

ROSA PEREZ-ISIAH

First of all, I have to say, I almost wore polka dots today, and I think we would've all been, the three of us, Erin, Dr. Ayana Allen-Handy. Thank you so much, great question. Where do we begin with this? Having people of color in our organizations does not create a culturally affirming school or organization. And I think when people begin in this journey and this work, sometimes that's the perception. "We're very diverse. Of course, we have culturally affirming spaces." But the real deal here is that you have to be intentional. You cannot make assumptions, and you have to be intentional about this work.

One thing that we engaged in last year as we navigated, and continue to navigate, the pandemic is a focus on the wellbeing of our community and that social emotional learning piece as a lever for equity. And so, we embraced the work around social emotional learning, developed a three-year plan, and part of that plan began with self. And as we engage our community and our stakeholders, our staff and students in this work, and our families, we know that it begins with ourselves and our beliefs about our students, our beliefs and biases, and how those beliefs translate into behaviors, which then have an impact on whether we are creating those culturally affirming spaces in our schools. So, an example is that work, and that work of self and addressing what the needs are of our diverse community.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Dr. Perez. Reed?

REED SWIER

Thank you. And just how much that resonates, starting with self, and I appreciate that theme, that we continue to kind of engage. The piece that I want to lean on is, I think Rawlin talked about leaders establishing vision and Dr. Mohamed Khalifa's work around culturally responsive leadership. So much of my work, I spend time talking to district superintendents. Whether it's post-training, pre-training, during training, debriefs in between, processing, a lot of which is with white leaders, processing their defensiveness and fragility. I think in engaging superintendents and districts, I'm trying to transform this into a positive. Where I'm seeing success is the leaders that lean in, that are saying, "This is not an initiative. We're not going to throw this in the initiative fatigue bucket, but we are going to say this is a foundational approach. Culturally responsive sustaining education is not an add-on. Everything else fits into that plate."

I think one key piece that happened this week that I was excited about, one of our partnering districts, actually that David Lopez, part of the WestEd team, kind of ushered in some of this push in his prior role here at Metro, was designated a top-five institution to work at in regard to



their DEI and inclusion work. And a teacher in that district, we were going through a district self-assessment that our team developed, which we'll share the link of. And a teacher in that district, we were ranking, "Where are you in your cultural responsiveness?" And it's zero to two. They gave a lot of zeroes around specific indicators, that they're still struggling with. But the two was that the district and the superintendent knows this is of critical importance. So foundationally, if we can start there, and we don't have to continue to have this back and forth with, "How do I engage this? Do we engage it? My own defensiveness and fragility," based on the identities that we hold, that, for me, was a win. I'm thinking about, "How do we keep building there?"

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Reed. Passing the mic to Dr. Cooper.

AYANNA COOPER

Thank you. I'd just like to first start and acknowledge the linguistic diversity of everyone who's logged on today. Would you mind putting the languages that you speak in the chat? Thank you. All right. Arabic, Spanish, American Sign Language. Wonderful. Spanglish. Korean. I like to do that waterfall of languages. Again, I really frame my work around building capacity to better support English learners, multilingual learners in K–12 settings. And so, as you can see from the language waterfall in the chat, I just want to read off the top six languages. Spanish. Number two, Arabic. Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali, and number six is Haitian-Creole. And so, part of creating those culturally affirming spaces also means to include language and how that's done as part of our school communities.

My four languages are English, northern, because I'm from Boston, and it comes out when I go home, southern, because I've made Atlanta my home for over 20 years, and of course, Ebonics. I can code switch if you need me to. So, thank you for engaging in that. But I list those languages for several reasons. Because again, I saw earlier in the conversation, you can't acknowledge, advocate, or affirm groups of students and families if you don't know that they're there. And oftentimes, with our language, we say, "All students. All learners. Everyone."

Sometimes, it can water down, and we lose sight of the people who are making up these school communities. So, I think it's important to make sure that the language is inclusive but also our practices are. I always like to start with some data around linguistic diversity. And so, a small example of that would be for school leaders to look at language data that is part of their school communities and districts. District leaders as well.

Also, on a larger scale, looking at trends. And perhaps these schools and districts may look vastly different than they did 10 to 15 years ago, but that's also what helps to continue to develop our communities. We can't do the same old thing the same old way and expect different results. How are our learning communities changing, and how are we being proactive about it? Notice I didn't say reactive, but proactive. And I'll stop there. I'm going to pass the mic.

ERIN BROWDER

Let's pass it to Jabari.

JABARI LYLES

Sure, sure. I think unfortunately, in my world of LGBTQ inclusion in schools, there is this huge gap between policy and practice, and hearts, minds, and beliefs. And unfortunately, we are trying to legislate and litigate people's beliefs around gender and sexuality, and that's what gets really tricky, particularly at the school level. I think back to 2016, when then-President Obama, my president, put a dear colleague letter out and said, "This is what we mean when we say gender and sex in title IX."

And then, in 2017, the reality star formerly known as the president rescinded that guidance and said, "This is not what we're going to do. Instead of the federal government governing our approach to transgender students, we're going to leave that to the districts. We're going to leave that to local education administrations." And while I was frustrated about that, it sparked this conversation about how it's incumbent upon local leaders to make the decisions for their communities.

I do believe that the federal government should mandate and make it very clear about what schools should do when it comes to trans students, but in Maryland, it enabled us to not look at the federal government, to look to our local leaders and say, "What exactly are you going to do for queer and trans students?" If anyone knows anything about Maryland, we have Frederick County, which is actually the largest county by landmass, and kind of a conservative county. They were the first county to pass a gender-inclusive policy in Maryland, policy 443. And so, they took that first step in saying that if you are a trans student in schools, you have the right to be called the name that you want to be called and the pronoun that you want to be referred to by. And you have the right to participate in athletics, and school teams, and gender-based facilities.

And I think that while that policy was a huge win, what we didn't spend enough time on was that sense of self, that core belief. Why are these things important? What are the conditions and beliefs that enabled us to disbelieve that trans students should've had these rights in the first place? And so, I think what I really try hard to do is close that gap between policy and belief, so folks understand why is it that we have these policies. After Frederick passed that policy, Baltimore was actually the second district, and I was one of the large leaders of that effort. I've always had to balance a very delicate dance between working within systems and, quite frankly, against systems.

So, I planned a protest on the lawn of the school building to say, "Local leaders, what exactly will you do?" In a couple of years, we were able to pass policy JBB. And so, I point to these examples because we have these incredible policies in Maryland from Frederick County to Baltimore. We're now seeing some in Anne Arundel County and Howard County, but there still isn't a real understanding about when it comes to the personal. I think back to that iceberg. Those beliefs that we have. How do they enable us to effectively implement these policies? And that's still yet to be seen. So, we can't legislate and litigate people's hearts and minds. While I think that policy

is one of the answers, it's not the only answer. We still have to have conversations about where our cultural beliefs come from and how they impact how we treat students.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Jabari. Passing the mic to Dr. Allen-Handy.

AYANA ALLEN-HANDY

Hi, everyone, again. Wow. What an amazing group of colleagues here today. When I think about culturally affirming spaces in my particular work, I recently went through the tenure process. And when you go through that process that I survived, and I do say survive because it is a trip, you really get to see the power structures that are in place in ways that you wouldn't. So, one of the things I've really committed my work to is using the master's tools to tear down the master's house, so to speak. Having been able to go through this process, understand what it looks like to gain tenure at an institution of higher education, it is my job to now bring those behind me.

And one of the things I've really focused on is what Rawlin talked about earlier about youth participatory action research and community-led action research. The majority of my research is really focused on not really empowering folks, because people are already empowered, but using the tools that the academy likes to reserve for their own and doing work around building the capacity of marginalized communities to kind of work their way through their own oppression.

Giving them the language, the tools, the ways of knowing and being that they already have and leveraging those through a process that looks very much like what the institution tries to reserve for itself. And so, demystifying or democratizing these methodologies, giving them access to things like publication to get their voices out there around issues that are important to them. And so, culturally affirming spaces, I also look at it as counter spaces. There are just some spaces that we have to create for ourselves. And that is not to say that others aren't welcome. But in order to really combat the microaggressive behavior that we or students might experience in schools, we need to have these counter spaces where they are affirmed, where I can be my full, true, authentic self. So, culturally affirming spaces, it's hard. A lot of negotiation has to go back and forth, particularly when you're a part of the system, but also trying to dismantle the system from within.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Dr. Allen-Handy. And I just want to lift up some of what we've heard across all of the responses, a focus on self-awareness, of starting with oneself, of naming a challenge, using tools like a self-assessment to identify where the starting point is and to also build communities so

that we're all looking at the same thing. We talked about knowing who is in the room. All the language diversity in this space.

And that was a simple question, and now we feel even more bonded because we know something different about someone than how we initially started. Thinking about the hearts and minds, and this phrase that you used, Jabari, of legislating beliefs. I'm going to sit with that. That's an invitation. Thank you. Also, thinking about what Dr. Allen-Handy just shared, the tools and resources that we can put in the hands of our students, our families, our communities so that they can self-govern and create the realities that allow them to flourish and live their best lives.

Thank you all for those shares. Our next couples of questions are, how do we work to reduce and transform systemic harm in schooling and school systems? And then, piggybacking, how do we avoid furthering a culture of compliance? What we're situating is that a culture of compliance is often what perpetuates some of the systemic harm or contributes to it. And so, in your work, in your experience, what have you seen in terms of the reducing and transforming that harm to more validating, supportive, caring, nurturing environments for our racially, culturally, linguistically, and gender-diverse students? And we're going to start with Jabari for that question.

JABARI LYLES

Yeah, I think in the beginning, I want to zoom in on this culture of compliance. Because for a while, it was commonplace. It was OK to deny LGBTQ students their basic abilities to be themselves at school, whether that be uniforms, or athletics, or restrooms, or bathrooms. And a lot of that is back to this whole notion of starting with ourselves. Let's be real about the things we were taught about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. How did those beliefs enable us to think things about our students? How LGBTQ identity is seen largely as a cultural failure, a taboo, or a moral failure, when really, it's commonplace, and it's something that communities, particularly communities of color, have celebrated throughout existence, and really interrogating how colonization and racism have really played into how we talk about gender and sexual diversity.

And so, I think we have to get real about how we got here, how some of the hesitation or disbelief that we have about people and their own agency to self-define who they are, I think, is huge. There's a lot of cultural healing that we have to do for how we got to this place.

But I think, oftentimes, schools are looking for the right answer to prevent if something is ever going to happen. And I think that might not be a smart goal. Really, there needs to be a strategy for when. And so, installing strategies and systems of justice is huge. Restorative practices. For us to sit down and talk about how harm was caused. Maybe you didn't believe that this was harmful but let me talk about how it was. Microaggressions, which I take umbrage a little bit with that word because I think it minimizes the aggression that so many communities of color and marginalized communities face.

But I think we can't have these strategies for inclusion without having strategies for justice. Not really if something is going to happen, but when, and how do we heal. And I'm hearing this through line about starting with ourselves and our personal beliefs as the base for some of this stuff, but also thinking about when we get things wrong, when we misstep, when we have spots that we didn't see. How do we heal from that harm?

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Jabari. Dr. Allen-Handy?

AYANA ALLEN-HARDY

Sure. I think this is a wonderful question, particularly because the way that we reduce harm is remove those who are causing harm. In the space that I'm in, in a school of education, these are the teacher educators, the folks who are preparing teachers, and yet they are deficient in a lot of the cultural competency, justice orientations that we're talking about today. So, in order to reduce harm, we need to totally restructure teacher education. How can we actually map culturally affirming practices as non-negotiable? I sit in faculty meetings with distinguished professors who say, "I don't do social justice," as if it's a choice in education, as if it is something that Ayana and those folks, the radical folks do over there. I think in order to reduce the harm, it's removal. But especially in a system like our higher education systems, where you have these structures of lifelong appointments.

People don't actually have to change. I love what Jabari was saying about the alignment or dis-alignment between beliefs, practices, dispositions, and policies. Those policies ingrained into the structure that cannot be shaken up, then those practices and beliefs can be perpetuated. And the way we reduce that harm is to shake up a system like that. How do we do that? These are questions I'm constantly thinking about and pondering. But I do think a critical place for this in my world is really the structure of teacher education and the teacher educators themselves.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Dr. Allen-Handy. You do call to mind the work of Dr. Maria del Carmen Salazar, who does work of teacher evaluation as a cultural practice. And what she's introducing is, how do we solidify or have indicators of cultural competence, of cultural responsiveness in our teacher evaluation system? Some of the work that she did looking for equity and the word culture across some of our more famous frameworks that barely mention it. If we start looking at educator effectiveness through this lens, how do we support, and also providing support so we're not just evaluating something we're not developing ourselves. I hear her voice when you spoke. Thank you. And Dr. Perez-Isiah.

ROSA PEREZ-ISIAH

I love what Dr. Ayana said and what you just added. Thank you so much for that. When I think about how we can reduce harm and avoid this culture of compliance, it's by naming it, by calling it out. Some people are still refusing to acknowledge that we have an issue. And on another

note, I think about if we can truly educate without equity and social justice. I don't believe so. They cannot be separate. It's not education, in my opinion, without those pieces. Because when we avoid the conversations and the work behind it, then we're essentially ignoring a great number of our students, staff, and communities.

It's as if we don't exist. Another important piece is, when we're silent, silence is oppression. Silence is oppressive. And it may seem passive, but trust me, it is oppressive. And when we're silent that way, we're surrendering to racism, to the forces of whatever it may be that are harming many of our students in our communities.

Another piece I think is really important in reducing and transforming this harm is really being proactive. The murder of George Floyd was in the faces of everyone, whether you wanted to admit that racism occurs and impacts people or not. And the pandemic was a reality check for many educators who thought there's oppression and racism, but "It's not really happening here."

It really gave us a different perspective about what our students and communities experience, where we as a system have failed to provide resources, and tools, and supports to many of our students. So, I say you start by talking about it, acknowledging that it exists. And when you don't do that, you're part of that problem, that oppressive system that continues to hurt our students and prevents us from creating culturally affirming spaces.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Dr. Perez-Isiah. And Reed, you can close us out on this question.

REED SWIER

No, I really appreciate those connections. And the one piece I would add from our vantage point in terms of the work we do around root cause analysis, we've been tasked, particularly in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, where systems have now said, "Oh, racism is a thing that we need now have to think about," and districts said, "Maybe I can use this pot of money to engage this work," we've had a lot of calls for this idea of an equity audit. And we enter that space trying to say, "OK, we need a co-creative group of diverse stake holding individuals, from community, to teachers, to district leaders."

And then, we go through policies. And what continues to just be such a reckoning is looking at code of conducts, looking at disciplinary policies and procedures, and quite literally seeing codified control, where in paper, we are saying that this is how we're engaging our students, and in disproportionate numbers, we're seeing, "This is how you're engaging your Black and Brown students." Where we're continuing to see those disparate outcomes.

I really appreciate Jabari's push to this idea of transformative justice, restorative practice, what it looks like to engage culture as a way of being both proactive and reactive, what it looks like to redefine and rewrite the policy, but then the training that, to our other colleague's point, just doesn't exist. You look at what you need to jump in a classroom, and then you layer that with

87% of our teachers are white, then you layer that with power, privilege, and identity impact, and that harm is there.

So, I think how we move into relationship-building based on identity, self-reflection at core, restorative justice that's not whitewashed but is culturally responsive and gives credit to the indigenous roots, all of those pieces, I think, are where we want to go. But when we do that work of looking at the codes of conduct, the disciplinary process, it's still on paper in so many districts. Just seeing that, and then the ways in which we try to push from there.

ERIN BROWDER

Thank you, Reed. And adding to your response that we see on paper, and we see in practice with teachers and the referrals, the different ways that they impose that codified control. I like that phrase as well. Thank you. David is having technical issues, but he's going to try to pop in here and pose a question for you all.

DAVID LOPEZ

I'm happy to be back. I've just been blown away. But I want to come back a little bit to a few things that the panelists have offered around the culture of compliance. Dr. Perez-Isiah, you brought that back up. Jabari, you talked a little bit about when to be within the system, and there are moments where we have to be outside of the system. And I think Dr. Allen-Handy, you talked about using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. For a different project, I was interviewing another scholar. I'll keep him confidential. Black scholar. He pushed in that interview to say that often, our educators, the higher they move up in our system, the more compliant they have to be with the system to, very practically, get the promotion. We don't necessarily promote radicals as a system.

And so, I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to what that means. How do we navigate that challenge as educators as we hope to gain positional power to dismantle the house? How do we navigate that? And I want to contextualize that based on our social identities. Erin and I will often talk about how I can say the same thing in a training and be very differently received than Erin is, even though we scripted the exact same sentence. And so, I'm hoping as we talk about how we navigate that, as we move through the system, if we can also talk about how our social identities impact that as well, if we're comfortable. I haven't heard from Dr. Ayanna Cooper. If you want to start. If not, feel free to jump in, if you want to start us off.

AYANNA COOPER

Sure, sure, thank you so much. Gosh, I just want to connect back to so much, but I'm watching the clock. OK, a couple of things. Reed, I want to connect back to something you said, and Jabari, and everybody. First of all, what this looks like with the schools and partners I work with is, number one, we have to embrace being uncomfortable. You've got to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Imagine having on a pair of shoes that you just bought that looked great



with the outfit but hurt your feet. You've got to keep them on. You've got to keep the shoes on. Because this work is not all about everybody feeling happy.

This work gets messy. So how do we embrace the messiness? And that means that we're making progress. And one of the things I really wanted to hone in on is this idea of being data-driven versus being data-informed. I just had a conversation yesterday with a school, and they were talking about all the things they were doing for their multilingual population, but there were datasets that they weren't using.

So now, they're being selective. "We're going to use this data because we can work with it. It makes us more comfortable." Well, that's not helping you really make the best decisions. How can you become data-informed? Again, Reed, I just want to give you some statistics about English-learner populations from the United States Department of Education. Right now, about 15% of English learners are chronically absent. About 14% of English learners have been retained. And about 13% of English learners have experienced out-of-school suspension.

So, you take these numbers, and then you have language access to content as a barrier, and there you go. I'm not comfortable with these numbers. This, to me, is my iceberg. These are the numbers that we know about and that got reported. But imagine all of the numbers that we don't know about. Clearly, I believe that this is much lower than what's actually happening. How are we being informed, and what data points are we using? I'll give us diversity. We're diverse because I'm a Virgo, and you're a Sagittarius. And you're a pescatarian, and I'm a carnivore. I'll give us diversity, but we are not equitable, and we are definitely not inclusive. So again, how do we embrace being uncomfortable with the work?

The other part I wanted to connect to is really looking at that positionality. And Jabari talked about this. How am I as a non-district-employee able to kind of move things along a little further than if I were a district employee? And how do we embrace that and say, "Here's where I can get more traction by being this outsider who works alongside versus being someone who is in a district and has to think about promotion and all of those things district leaders think about, what their career trajectories are."

I knew early on in my career that this is the work that I was built to do, if you will. So, I had to embrace lots and lots of uncomfortable situations, and microaggressions, and door-slamming. You name it. But it never stopped me from continuing to seek a community of practitioners who wanted to do the work alongside me. So, although we're in these boxes today, in my mind, I feel like I'm locking arms with all of you right now. So, thank you.

JABARI LYLES

Thank you for that, Dr. Cooper. And I'll also jump in, in response to David's question. I really latched onto this whole notion of getting the promotion. I think that the villain that we have to kind of talk about as people advancing social justice is capitalism. Quite frankly, and we've heard this before, there's no ethical consumption under capitalism anyway. I could do a whole panel on how I have to navigate being the first Director of LGBTQ Affairs within a system that was

advancing policies so that my people wouldn't be there. The fact that I got to traipse around City Hall as a fat, Black, queer, gender-nonconforming person really did matter, and it played a role in what conversations I was able to have, how much proximity to power I was able to have.

But at the end of the day, I have to eat, I have rent to pay, I have family to support. And so, I think that constantly negotiating how we push on systems carefully, so they don't trample us, so that we can eat at the end of the day, but still remain true to our values, is a delicate dance. And often, we don't really understand the very complex and difficult position that we put a lot of our internal and external advocates in when they are advancing systems, advancing change, but also at the end of the day, are inventing their own careers in their own pockets as well. I don't have an answer for that. I think I'm constantly interrogating how capitalist culture shows up and how we proliferate a lot of this stuff. But working within a system as someone that the system is actively working against—whoo. Still healing.

ROSA PEREZ-ISIAH

I have to say something about that. Jabari, I love everything that you just said. And I am personally in that position always as director in a school district. Number one, align yourself, and find some co-conspirators in this work. That's super important because it's empowering to be around likeminded individuals who want changes for students. And the reality of a capitalist culture. At the end of the day, when we create culturally affirming spaces for students and staff, when we are equitable in our work as educators and ed leaders, students succeed. All students achieve. And if we're looking for success, that's the payoff. I am doing it for success for individual students because I had those opportunities, and that is why I'm here today. But if you want to look at it from a different lens, from that capitalist lens, the goal is student achievement. And that pays in many different ways.

So, when you're doing this work and getting results, which you will when done right—and boards want success. Parents want success. Of course, students want success. Teachers want success. With that success comes recognition. And it's balancing that. It is the way you're delivering information. It's the way you're bringing people along and creating an alliance, partnership, and a co-conspirator, those doing the work with you. But ultimately, the achievement speaks volumes. And looking at data and that achievement is really part of that equity review and those check-ins. That's all.

AYANA ALLEN-HANDY

Wow, I'm still really taking it all in right now. I'm having a physical reaction to this conversation. Jabari, what you said about no ethical consumption of capitalism. When you're in systems that are purely run on capitalism, particularly being at a private institution. And I think going back to David's question around promotion and how to navigate the system, I think about that saying, "Never forget where you come from." My roots, the antecedents of who I am and what I'm doing now, are being a classroom teacher. Those are the most transformative years of my life, those seven years being in the classroom, working with students. And so, that is who I bring into

all these other spaces, me, Mrs. Allen, with my 1st grade kiddos who changed my life in ways that I can't even express.

I think when you're kind of going up this promotional ladder of, for me specifically, the academy, it's giving the academy what it wants by doing what I want to do. For instance, the academy thrives off of publications, external funding, incredible service, amazing teaching. It thrives off of all of these things. So, I said, "OK, I'm going to give y'all what you want. I'm going to get external funding for projects that center community, that are community-led and youth-led. OK, I'm going to write and publish. But not only am I going to write and publish, it's going to be coauthored with the folks doing the actual work."

So, in my situation, it's, how do you leverage the resources of the system and put them in the hands of others to be able to shift the perspective of the capitalism? It's getting the funding, the part of capitalism, but now, I'm going to hire community folks to be full-time employees of the university, so now they have access to everything I have access to. And I'm not going to say, "Oh, I'm just researching and working for these folks." No, they work for us, they are employees.

So, when I think about the promotion, there's no way that I could be here by myself. We have to lift as we climb. And I'm still standing on the shoulders of giants. And now, it is my turn to do so. I'm amazed that one of my students is in the room. I'm like, "What are you even doing here?" She sent me a message that she was here. You just never know who's in the spaces we're in. So, I just thank you all for this discussion once again.

ERIN BROWDER

Awesome. And Reed, I'm just circling up with you, but I'm taking your pause as yes. Thank you. All right. So, we are very close to time. Again, we have a lot more exciting questions. We definitely need a part three, four, five, all of the parts. But we'd like to invite closing thoughts from each of you, and that can be whatever's on your heart and mind, it can be a non-negotiable as you engage in this work but closing thoughts that you'd like to impart with our audience. And the floor's open. Once you're finished, you can pass the mic to someone else.

AYANNA COOPER

Dr. Ayana has me scrolling the list. Now, I'm looking for my students. I'm just checking the list, checking it twice. Got class in a couple of hours, so I just said, "Let me check and see here." Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this conversation. It is never enough time. So, I have to embrace getting uncomfortable with there being so much more to say and so much more to hear. For me, this work is a civil rights issue. I ask eight simple questions. Most educators can only answer three to four of the eight. I call them eight simple questions but with complex answers.

And so, when we're thinking about our linguistically diverse populations, yes, let's serve as advocates for them, but let's also show them how to advocate for themselves. You also don't

have to identify personally with that population to be an advocate or an ally. So, I get the question a lot, "Oh, why do you do this work? Are you an English learner?"

And I'll say, "No, but I'm sure my ancestors were." I also acknowledge that teachers don't wake up every day with the intent on violating someone's civil rights. Nobody wakes up and says, "Let me get two folks angry before lunch. Let me get that on my to-do list." Nobody does that, so I just want to put that out there. However, it happens all the time because of past practice. We've always done it this way.

Somebody said this is how we do it. And so, instead of us just going along with the status quo, let's find a community that can help build our sense of advocacy and get more courageous. Like those agitators. They're putting the agitators back in the washing machines because the clothes weren't getting washed. So how can we make good trouble and be good agitators? So, thank you.

ROSA PEREZ-ISIAH

Thank you, that was beautiful, Dr. Ayanna. I have your work on my list. I just want to say that creating culturally affirming spaces, being a leader who does the work with equity and social justice, it's our collective responsibility. It's really our moral imperative. If we don't educate and lead in this way, then we are essentially leaving so many of our students behind and saying, "You're not worth the time, and space, and work to include you, to educate you fully, to address your whole needs." If it's not you, then who? This is our responsibility. It is our shared responsibility. Thanks.

JABARI LYLES

I can jump in with some closing thoughts. I guess I would say, first, as a queer person, and as queer people, we are always told that we don't know ourselves. And so, believe us. Believe your students. Believe them. I think so many times, cause we were going to talk about authentic student engagement, I'm really sick of doing work for students that isn't done with students. And so, the phrase youth advisory board is a triggering phrase for me because they are often not done well. You can't have a group of students, and feed them pizza, and ask them what they want and think, and then go into another room where it happens, and then pick apart what you think might be appropriate for them. All LGBT kids have been asking forever has been to be believed and trusted about the supports that they need. So, when it comes to their name, their pronouns, building strong relationships with their families, I think that's another narrative we have to shift, that we don't want to accept as the status quo that young people can't have strong and nurturing relationships with their parents and caregivers.

We want to do that when it's possible. But when it's not possible, then what do we do? So, believe those students. And then, of course, something I've said before, really think about the earliest messages. Think back to when you were a young person. What did your parents say? What did the media say? Your religious leaders, your teachers? What did they teach you about being queer? What did they teach you about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

people? And really examine how those beliefs show up in your work. So much of this is about the education that we did not have. Inclusive sex ed, I could do a whole talk just on inclusive sex ed. But we are so starved for knowledge about ourselves, starved for knowledge about gender and sexuality, that it creates harm. So, LGBTQ people, believe us.

REED SWIER

I would just kind of add and center for my own positionality as a cis white man carrying a lot of power and privilege in these spaces, what does active allyship look like? What does it mean to step in and step back? I know that's ironic, as I'm on this platform right now. And what does it mean to share voice and know how I support as a co-conspirator? So, the folks on here who hold these identities of power and privilege, what is the everyday work? Because ultimately, we are making choices every day that either uphold the system or help to break it down. And for me, if I don't question that every time I step into a space that's about equity, if I don't question why I'm even there, I'm not doing my own personal work. So, I'll just leave us with that and say thank you to my colleagues on this.

AYANA ALLEN-HANDY

Wow. So, my closing takeaways for you all is that no matter your positionality, no matter your position, your role, think about what is in your locus of control. There are so many things that are out of our control in the systems that we work in. But what is in your locus of control? As a classroom teacher, that one word of affirmation to a little Black girl like me, "I love your natural hair," what does that do to the child's sense of self? And then, think about if you are a principal, and you have this deep responsibility to all of the teachers, and all of the staff, and all of the people. You're the shepherd of your school. How are you not only personally doing the work, kind of the self-excavation?

So, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz really talks about this excavation of the self. That's where the real work starts. And I think that gets to a lot of what Jabari was saying about my personal beliefs, how they align and dis-align with the systems that I'm working within. For me, what I constantly try to think about is, "What is in my locus of control? I'm sitting in this seat. I'm at this table. What can I do within that? And even if I'm not at the table, I matter. What I'm doing matters." And so, that would be my closing remarks.

ERIN BROWDER

Wow. Thank you all. I think we're all sitting with a lot of new learnings, and understandings, and connections. And so, I just want to hold space for all of that. I want to express our gratitude and appreciation on behalf of REL West, my team here, for you all, just coming and delivering. We already got a comment of, "When is part three?" I said, "We'll keep you posted." And the work

continues. And thank you for helping us, being a guide or lamppost on our journeys. We appreciate it greatly.