

Leadership Policy for Equity Platform

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ELP 652: Leadership and Policy for Inclusion

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April 30, 2026

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Overview of why Critical Policy is Important to me as an Equity-oriented Leader

One of the most unexpected themes in the LIFTS program at the University at Buffalo, in my opinion, is the strong focus on equity. From the first semester through our last, each course has devoted a section to equity in schools. When deciding to continue my education in leadership, I was not expecting to learn about becoming an equity-focused leader. Through my coursework, internship and practice in LIFTS, equity has now become part of my core values and platform. I see the importance of adding an equity focus to mission and vision statements for all school communities. “By defining equity solely as a value rather than as an approach to practice that can be empirically researched and measured, programs and leaders may grow in their capacity to celebrate diversity or diversify the curriculum.” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015) I have grown in my capacity as a leader seeing marginalized students through an equity-focused lens. Creating an inclusive environment for all subgroups of students to have the opportunity to be successful in their school community is essential to creating an inclusive school culture.

Anti-Black and Anti-LGBTQ+ Educational Policies

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been under attack across our country ebbing and flowing with administrative changes in Washington. Recently, LGBTQ+ and Black or African American curricula have been restricted, including book banning, holding back historic information about our country’s populations and historic events that have occurred. Bringing up the topics of race, gender and sexuality in the classroom through discussion or examples in literature is prohibited in some states across the US. Students of color and LGBTQ+ students “can feel their very existence is being rejected.” (Ma et al., 2023) Educational policies that diminish the value of marginalized students negatively affect academic outcomes and

psychological struggles. Some examples of anti-black and anti-LGBTQ+ school policies focus on the censorship of these marginalized students. They are not allowed to share with their education community details about their heritage and or journey becoming the person they are today. This creates barriers in the school community between them and mainstream students. “Educational equity and the complex causes of inequity both within and around schools are the civil rights of our age.” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015) When fostering a positive and effective school environment, educational leaders need to embrace the differences in race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual orientation, and gender to grow the capacity of the students to create an equitable school culture.

Examples from Literature and my own Experiences About how this Critical Policy Issue Contributes to the Marginalization of Students Based on Various Sociocultural Identities

“School boards face the difficult task of navigating the politics of their communities and competing interests surrounding diversity and deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents.” (Duarte & Fernandez, 2025) The tough decision of creating policy for a school community falls on the school board of the district. The school board members are elected by the community members of the school district giving constituents voice in school matters such as policy. The political makeup and generational age of a community will determine how conservative or radical individuals will be when anti-Black and anti-LGBTQ+ policy is brought before the board such as DEI. There are some parents who want the ability to decide when their children are taught about controversial topics such as transgender or slavery but wish to do so on their own timeline which may not align with the curriculum map. Sometimes policy removes the experiences of different cultures making these families feel erased from their community. “Meanwhile, students and teachers are seemingly stuck in the

middle, having to contend with racist, sexist and trans-homophobic ideologies.” (Duarte & Fernandez, 2025)

Presently, I am the Fashion Design Technology instructor at the Calspan Career Center for Erie 1 BOCES. Two weeks ago, I was approached by our millennial, male social worker about a student who was born male and is transitioning to be female. The social worker wanted me to measure this student to be fitted for female clothing and teach her about styling looks to bring out her feminine attributes. I welcomed this student into class and paired her with two of my most open, kind and intelligent students who performed a color analysis and styled feminine looks from our clothing closet just as the social worker had asked. This was a positive experience for everyone involved. However, when I shared this experience with my Gen X colleagues, many of them were appalled stating that this experience crossed a line encouraging transgender transitioning in school. A former principal shared with me the key steps of support this student would need to have in place to protect the school from liability. I did not think to inquire about systems of protection in place trusting the school social worker did his due diligence to maintain his professionalism. The millennial aged individuals I shared this story with celebrated our openness of embracing this individual’s courage and curiosity to explore. I found it very interesting the very different generational interpretations of this experience.

Your own Proposed Improvements to Education Policies to Increase Inclusion

“When students find their schools to be affirming, they report lower rates of depression and suicidality. What’s more, a *Washington Post* report found that hate crimes against LGBTQI+ people on school property increased in states with anti-LGBTQ laws.” (Smith, 2024) I believe in DEI. I would campaign for policy that supported the differences among the students of my educational community. Over my 18-year career as a CTE instructor, I have witnessed

acceptance in my classroom of marginalized students that spend half of their school day with me at the career center. Anything from learning disabilities to race to gender identity to medical conditions, my classes have adapted to the students in the room that are different from themselves. Whether my class is learning from my belief in DEI policies or if it is their generation's practice, it makes me proud when grace and acceptance are expressed to marginalized students. My students represent the teachings in my classroom taking what they learn, either through soft skills or hands-on skills, out into the community through internships, employment or post-secondary education. Our classroom mimics the world outside of school. Bringing back and strengthening DEI policies is essential for today's students to become accepting and encouraging adults in their communities. "Focusing on DEI works, creating and sustaining safe places for our students to learn and our teachers to teach. This will aid in the development of thoughtful processes enabling our students to influence the community positively." (Duarte & Fernandez, 2025)

While I do believe that parents should have the opportunity to expose their children to controversial topics, it should not be at the expense of school program approved curriculum. Educational leaders and teachers are trained to meet students where they are at adapting the content of the curriculum to learning abilities and styles of students. I would not ban books from the library that my ELA department or librarian could produce a readability and documentation on the maturity level of the content of the book. I grew up in the 1980's and studied many books that are now banned such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *1984*, *Animal Farm* and *Fahrenheit 451*. I am more concerned with the lessons on how the teacher teaches the book to their classes than the content of the book trusting a trained professional. With the correct support from professionally trained educators, the themes and lessons of each of these classics can

successfully be taught with empathy, promoting understanding of different ideologies and broadening the minds of young adults. However, I do believe there is a time and a place for the topics of these books. If a student has a 10th grade reading ability but they are in 4th grade, the content of these books is too deep for their minds. Creating a rating system for books such as ratings for movies or video games could be a solution for educators and parents to meet in the middle. I also believe both sides of every historical event should be shared. In regards to slavery in the United States, the experience of African Americans should be shared right along with that of our Founding Fathers. Native American struggles should be taught along with Christopher Columbus “discovering America”. “Far from driving us apart from one another, embracing the narratives of all people—including historically marginalized groups and individuals—helps to build common understanding and ethical civic engagement across society.” (Halterman, 2023)

My own Lingering Questions About how I will Enact Equity-oriented Policies as a Leader

How can we best prepare our students for the next phase of their lives? Even though I am trained in fashion design, fashion technology and consumer studies, I am most passionate about guiding high school juniors and seniors to become contributing members of society after high school graduation. Enacting, leading by example and modeling behaviors I believe is the first step to preparing students for the real world. “A regression analysis of two CDC surveys—School Health Profiles 2020 and the 2021 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey—shows that high adoption rates of LGBTQI+-affirming school policies are strongly associated with decreased reports of bullying among all students at school.” (Smith, 2024) Based on this article, I question why some states across the US are pulling away from DEI initiatives that support the wellbeing of at-risk youth?

Imagine if the results of these two studies were reflected in society. Many activist groups are after policy change to include marginalized individuals. As a society, if we could be more accepting of our differences, affirming each person's ability, experiences and wisdom, I believe the crime rate would improve, citizens would feel heard, and the differences among us would be celebrated. We would be more open to learning from immigrants instead of fearing their culture. The different races that we subgroup in schools as marginalized students deserve an education free from discrimination. The experiences they receive in school with lessons of kindness and empathy will be carried into the world by students making society a better place. This is a cyclical process of receiving acceptance, kindness and support, then carrying it with you and passing it forward to someone else who will carry it on and pass it forward.

Conclusion

After completing the equity focused LIFTS program, I believe I have become an equity-oriented leader. Readings, case studies, practical interviews with educational leaders, internship experiences, research and project presentations have brought to my attention the focus on DEI policies that provide equity for marginalized student subgroups through diversity initiatives to include all students in the school population. The school community I lead will embrace differences giving everyone the opportunity to share their voice regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status and age. Preparing students for the next phase of their life will be a priority as they progress through grade levels building their self-esteem and sense of worth in their community. The community around the school reflects the teachings of the school as students share with their families accepting diversity, equality and inclusion making their community a better place.

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