USING DATA TO PROMOTE EQUITY
How test preparation material for the New York State School Building Leadership Exam Study Guide can be used as an engine for change.

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ABSTRACT:

In the process of reviewing for the School Building Leadership Exam, we're introduced to the fictional urban mixed-race Bridgemere Middle School and its new principal known only as Mr. D. We're given an anecdotal scenario and three documents of data.

As the narrative unfolds, we discover, along with Principal D, that Bridgemere is a school with less-than-stellar academic results, a growing performance gap between white and African-American students, a dysfunctional disciplinary system that shows evidence of racial bias, and a disturbing disconnect between the faculty's overwhelmingly positive assessment of how students are treated with regard to fairness and respect on the one hand and the students' deep dissatisfaction with the faculty's attitudes and behavior on the other.

Principal D will need to address the specific needs of his school's culture especially with regard to race and that, in turn, will mean identifying, culling, analyzing and interpreting data that lead to an effective program for change for the school. The School Building Leadership exam has a wealth of material that can help him in this process.

INTRODUCTION

The Coleman Report

Like many educators of a certain age, I first encountered the connection between data and equity back in the 1960s with the famous Coleman Report. That report was mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1966. A novel aspect of the Coleman report was that it examined the outputs of the educational system in terms of test scores. Performance Gaps, especially those based on race, became painfully apparent.

The way Coleman's main finding was explained to me then was that the only important factor in, or predictor of, a student's achievement in terms of test scores was the socio-economic status of the student's family.

Following is Coleman's summary of his team's findings from 1966

Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. (Hanushek, 2016).

Hanushek goes on to update Coleman's discouraging findings with the following:

Vastly more jarring is that the central goal of the report—the development of an education system that provides equal educational opportunity for all groups, and especially for racial minorities—has not been attained. Achievement gaps remain nearly as large as they were when Coleman and his team put pen to paper, even when better research has suggested ways to close them and even when policies have been promulgated that supposedly are explicitly designed to eliminate them. (Hanushek,2016)

Is Money the Answer?

Certainly, there has been much debate over the contents and meaning of the Coleman report and money for schools has always been central to the discussion. Like thirty-six other states, New York State uses a variation of the foundation program approach for funding education. In theory, the foundation program approach is both simple and equitable. It is simple in that it represents shared funding between the State and the local districts: what a local district cannot afford through property taxes alone will be provided by the state. It is equitable in the sense that every student is entitled to the same basic foundation amount of per pupil expenditure and every tax payer pays the same rate of property tax (Brimley, et. al., 2016, p. 134-156). In practice, New York's foundation program system for school funding is neither simple nor equitable.

In 1993, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. (CFE), which included most of New York City's education advocacy organizations, parent organizations, and about half of the city's community school boards, filed a constitutional challenge to New York State's school funding system alleging that the system underfunded New York City's public schools and denied its students the constitutional right to the opportunity for a sound basic education. The litigation was not terminated until November of 2006

The courts ruled that students were being denied their constitutional right to a sound basic education based on the New York State constitution. The court ordered far-reaching reforms to get more money for New York City schools as well as a number of high-needs local districts (Rebell, 2011).

The CFE victory was hailed by those of us who actively supported the move to get more funding for high-needs schools and did in fact bring significant funding increases for a few years. However, the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009 brought an end to much of the short-lived windfall for schools so that by 2011, funding for high needs schools was approximately 30% below what had been ordered as necessary in 2007 to meet the constitutionally mandated right of all students to a strong basic education (Rebell, 2011, p 7).

As for the notion of simplicity, the trial court stated: "The evidence demonstrates that the State aid distribution system is unnecessarily complex and opaque. It is purportedly based on an array of often conflicting formulas and grant categories that are understood by only a handful of people in State government. Even the State Commissioner of Education testified that he does not understand fully how the formulas interact." It was later revealed that there were approximately thirty separate funding streams comprising the state aid system (Rebell, 2011, p.9).

So, to answer the earlier question: *Is money the answer?,* most school leaders would reply: *We'll know if we ever see any.*

Are better schools and teachers the answer?

Back in 1967, Robert Schaefer posed the following question:

Why should our schools not be staffed, gradually if you will, by scholar-teachers in command of the conceptual tools and methods of inquiry requisite to investigating the learning process as it operates in their own classrooms? Why should our schools not nurture the continuing wisdom and power of such scholar-teachers?

(Schaefer, 1967)

Action Research

One approach to better schools and teachers at the local level is called *Action Research* (Glickman et.al. 2016)

COMPARISON OF ACTION RESEARCH AND TRADITIONAL RESEARCH
Traditional Research Purpose of traditional research is to develop new knowledge. Gain a better understanding of phenomena and develop hypotheses or test hypotheses. Traditional research usually is led by an outside expert.
Action Research Purpose of action research is to solve a practical problem and improve practice. Explore practical problems, guide action planning and evaluate results. Action research is usually led by practitioners.

PHASES OF ACTION RESEARCH – ELEMENTS OFTHE FEEDBACK	
Phase 1	Select focus area
Phase 2	Conduct needs assessment
Phase 3	Design action plan
Phase 4	Carry out action plan
Phase 5	Evaluate effects and revise

Of course, implementing an action research plan depends on finding, in Shaefer's words: *The scholar-teachers in command of the conceptual tools and methods of inquiry requisite to investigating the learning process as it operates in their own classrooms?*(Schaefer, 1967)

How test preparation material from the School Building Leadership Exam Study Guide can be used as an engine for change

For more than a decade, I have held voluntary review classes at the Touro College Graduate School of Education for students preparing to take the New Yok State School Building Leadership Exam as part of their efforts to become certified as school building leaders. In this paper, I discuss some of the preparation materials found at the New York State Education Department website that I use in my review classes as well as how I present the material. It may well be asked: "I'm not taking the NY SBL exam, so why should I be interested in this paper?"
There are at least three reasons:

The Material is Compelling.

The issues discussed in the long and difficult New York State SBL exam study guide cover a wide range of complex though important topics. In this paper we discuss the problem of possible institutionalized racism in the fictionalized Bridgemere Middle School, a middle school with a new principal, Principal D, in a diverse urban school district that is, as we shall see– *a school more true than real.*Bridgemere is not a real school, but the treatment of it by the test writers make it seem like it is.

Although the school exhibits many positives, a review of the data on the disciplinary system shows that, with regard to referrals and suspensions, African-American students receive a disproportionate number of both.

For example, although African-American students represent less that one fifth of the student population, those same African-American students account for more than half of the 5+ day suspensions, i.e., the suspensions for serious, level three offences.

There is also a disturbing widening of the achievement gap between the African-American student population and the student body as a whole.

Additionally, a survey conducted of both the faculty and the student body shows a wide disconnect between the faculty's perception of the school's disciplinary program, which is overwhelmingly positive with regard to issues like fairness and respect, and the much more negative perception of the disciplinary process as viewed through the students' eyes.

For example, 96% of faculty respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "All students are consistently treated fairly," while only 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 94% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Consequences for discipline infractions are fair and communicated clearly," while only 49% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

The new, hypothetical Principal D, is forced to contend with the realization, that his school, however unwittingly, may be guilty of institutionalized systemic racism.

The Material Deserves a Wider Audience.

Both the quality of the NY SBL exam study guide material that the State has so conscientiously prepared and provided, as well as the importance of the issues discussed in this material, suggest that more educators, along with interested parties from the community at large – one thinks immediately of school boards – would profit from the study and discussion of the sample problems found in the test prep materials.
Moreover, as will be seen, there is nothing specific to New York State that would preclude anyone from studying the exam prep materials. For example, the problem of institutionalized systemic racism in schools discussed in this papercertainly is a problem with which all of us need to be concerned.

The Material Can Serve as an Engine for Change.

The term "staff development" often is used as virtually a throw-away line in answer to questions like: "What steps should the principal now take moving forward." Little regard is given to exactly what that staff development might look like let alone whether or not it has any chance to be effective. Traditional superintendent's conference days have been shown to be effective in terms of increasing awareness of a problem, say, obesity, but not effective in terms of changing behavior. At next year's superintendents conference day, just as many, if not more, will still be obese.

What is needed to bring about change is an on-going program of study, peer review and support with clear goals and agenda and accountability for the participants. Principal D will need to develop and lead such a program to address the specific needs of his school's culture with regard to race. That, in turn, will mean identifying, culling, analyzing and interpreting data that can lead to an effective program for change for the school. The New York State School Building Leader Exam Study Guide has a wealth of material that can help him in this process. (Glickman et.al. 2016).

About this paper

What I discuss in this paper is a section of the NYSBL exam that I use in my review classes at Touro and that would also work well as part of an on-going district action research program of study as discussed above.

The section of the study guide examined here begins with an anecdotal review of the fictional Bridgemere Middle School and its newly hired Principal D. The anecdotal review is followed by three documents: the first has disaggregated state exam test scores for Bridgemere, the second has data about Bridgemere disciplinary issues - referrals and suspensions, and the third has results of a faculty/student survey. Each part has some discussion included.

Next come four selected response questions. In my review classes, after carefully reviewing the anecdotal review and the three documents, I arrange the students in groups of three or four to work on the selected response questions. However, in addition to selecting the correct or *best* response – which we have the State's opinion on – I ask them to explain why each of the *other* responses is not as good as the State's answer.

The final section of this paper addresses the issue of what to do moving forward, whether from the point of view of Principal D or from the point of view of educators or other interested parties who want to continue to use the test prep material from the New Yok State School Building Leadership Exam can be used as an engine for change.

BRIDGEMERE: A SCHOOL MORE TRUE THAN REAL

Scenario

Mr. D is beginning his first year as principal at Bridgemere Middle School, which currently enrolls approximately 950 students in grades 6–8. Bridgemere is one of two middle schools in a diverse urban school district, and its student population reflects the demographics of the district at large. Both the school and the district have a record of academic achievement at or above state averages. Bridgemere's vision statement, "An inclusive school where diversity is valued and all students have access to the instruction and support they need to learn at the highest level," is posted prominently on the school's website.

Student enrollment has remained fairly steady over the last few years, and attendance rates are above state averages. Family/caregiver support is generally strong, with parents/guardians of over 75% of Bridgemere's students attending parent-teacher conferences. In addition, Mr. D has inherited an experienced faculty at Bridgemere. The average level of experience for the school's teaching staff is 12 years, and there has been little faculty turnover over the past decade. A majority of the teachers live within district boundaries.

When Mr. D was hired, however, the district superintendent expressed concern that despite a vision of inclusion, achievement gaps were developing at Bridgemere. She asked that Mr. D identify gaps, analyze their root causes, and work with faculty to close them. Mr. D confers with teacher-leaders at Bridgemere, all of whom voice strong support for the school vision, as do most teachers with whom Mr. D interacts day to day. Mr. D also makes a point of speaking directly with parents/guardians as often as possible.

Most parents/guardians tell him that they are happy to have their children enrolled at a school with a strong public commitment to inclusion and diversity. However, some express concern about discipline policies and procedures. Several parents/guardians tell Mr. D that their children have received referrals and even suspensions that do not seem fair.

Mr. D assures parents/guardians that he will look closely at discipline incidents. He works with his leadership team to gather and review information about discipline policy at Bridgemere, including data on referrals and suspensions, as well as disaggregated achievement data. The administrative staff conducts a survey of faculty and students. Based on this information, Mr. D and the leadership team consider what actions may be appropriate to take.

(New York State Education Department 2020 *Study Guide)*

Discussion

Despite the many positives about Bridgemere, including a positive view as of diversity as stated in their mission statement, strong family/caregiver support, and a record of academic achievement at or above state and district averages, two serious concerns are revealed:

First, despite a vision of inclusion, achievement gaps are developing at Bridgemere. The district superintendent charges Principal D with the responsibility of identifying gaps, analyzing their root causes, and working with faculty to close them.

Second, some parents/guardians tell Principal D that although they are happy to have their children enrolled at a school with a strong public commitment to inclusion and diversity, some of them express concern about discipline policies and procedures. Several parents/guardians tell Mr. D that their children have received referrals and even suspensions that do not seem fair.

Document 1

State Assessment Results for All Students

This table displays the percentage of students in all groups scoring at or above Level 3 ("meets proficiency standard").

Subject	School	District	State
ELA	51%	44%	45%
Math	51%	45%	45%

State Assessment Results, by Student Group

Three-Year Comparison

This table displays the percentage of students, by grade level and group, scoring at or above Level 3 ("meets proficiency standard").

	Percent of School Population	3 Years Ago		2 Years Ago		Last Year	
		ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
Female	52%	51%	48%	54%	51%	56%	54%
Male	48%	43%	44%	44%	45%	46%	48%
Grade 6	32%	47%	45%	51%	47%	52%	50%
Grade 7	33%	49%	46%	49%	48%	50%	50%
Grade 8	35%	48%	47%	48%	49%	51%	52%
Economically Disadvantaged	70%	45%	44%	47%	46%	48%	48%

	Percent of School Population	3 Years Ago		2 Years Ago		Last Year	
		ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
English Language Learners	12%	37%	39%	38%	41%	40%	44%
Students with Disabilities	11%	39%	38%	40%	39%	43%	41%
White	49%	51%	49%	54%	52%	57%	57%
Black or African American	18%	42%	42%	41%	41%	39%	38%
Hispanic or Latino	22%	44%	44%	45%	46%	46%	47%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	4%	55%	55%	57%	59%	59%	62%
Multiracial	7%	44%	44%	49%	45%	52%	52%

Discussion

Document 1 shows disaggregated state test results. We see that Bridgemere's results on both the ELA exam and the math exam are above the district and state averages. However, although the passing rate for white students has been gradually rising over the last three years, the passing rate for Black or African American students has been steadily declining so that the performance gap between white students and black/African American students has increased from 9 percentage points in ELA and 7 percentage points in Math three years ago to 18 % in ELA and 19 % in Math last year.

We note that the tables display the percentage of students in all groups scoring at or above Level 3 ("meets proficiency standard"). Although this convention is consistent with the No Child Left Behind mindset, it never the less makes no distinction between Level 3 students and Level 4 students, so we have no way of knowing how many students achieved Level 4 success. Rather, our primary focus is on the *Left Behind* students, those receiving 1's and 2's. In other words, the focus is on *mediocrity* rather than *excellence,* i.e., mediocre scores as opposed to excellent scores.It is not that the studentsreceiving 1's and 2's are any less important, it is just that their grades on the state assessments are low. One worries that the 1's and 2's might be stigmatized by their test scores and forced into a school life of endless, mind-numbing remediation while the 4's do not receive the enrichmentthat might prove valuable for them.

Document 2

Summary of Levels of Behavior Infractions (from School Code of Conduct)

Level 1 infractions may include: Noncompliance with adult direction or insubordination; noncompletion of assigned work; inappropriate social interactions, such as talking out of turn, teasing, or not getting along with others; difficulty with self-regulation of behavior; difficulty communicating or managing emotions appropriately; minor misconduct in the hallway, cafeteria, or public spaces

Level 2 infractions may include: Aggressive arguing; alcohol or drug possession, or under the influence (first offense); emotional outbursts including profanity; damage to personal or school property; leaving school without permission; horseplay, physical aggression in the form of pushing or shoving

Level 3 infractions may include: Alcohol or drug possession, or under the influence (second offense); attacking student or school personnel; bullying, harassment; sexual offense; fighting; verbal or written threats

Discipline Referrals by Student Group (last year)

	Percent of School Population	Level 1 (1,751 total)	Level 2 (810 total)	Level 3 (342 total)
Female	52%	39%	32%	26%
Male	48%	61%	68%	74%
Economically Disadvantaged	70%	69%	71%	73%
English Language Learners	12%	12%	*	--blank
Students with Disabilities	11%	18%	15%	*
White	49%	31%	27%	21%
Black or African American	18%	36%	42%	47%
Hispanic or Latino	22%	18%	19%	20%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	4%	*	*	--blank
Multiracial	7%	*	*	*
*Percentage suppressed to protect student privacy.				

Suspension Rates by Student Group (last year)

	Percent of School Population	1–2 Day Suspensions (201 total)	3–4 Day Suspensions (109 total)	5+ Day Suspensions (37 total)
Female	52%	25%	29%	18%
Male	48%	75%	71%	82%
Economically Disadvantaged	70%	70%	68%	74%
English Language Learners	12%	*	*	*
Students with Disabilities	11%	*	*	*
White	49%	26%	22%	*
Black or African American	18%	41%	46%	54%
Hispanic or Latino	22%	15%	19%	*
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	4%	*	*	--blank
Multiracial	7%	26%	11%	*
*Percentage suppressed to protect student privacy.				

Discussion:

We learned from the Scenario section that some parents expressed concern about discipline policies and procedures. And for good reason. In a middle school of about 950 students, there were 2903 referrals or, on average, about 3 referrals per student! There were 342 level 3 referrals and when we consider what a level 3 infraction is, namely:

> **Level 3 infractions may include:** *Alcohol or drug possession, or under the influence (second offense); attacking student or school personnel; bullying, harassment; sexual offense; fighting; verbal or written threats*

and also consider that these students are children in about the 12- to 14- year range, we get a truly disturbing picture of what life is like at the school.

Looking at the suspension rates, we see that there are at least a minimum (and probably many more) 713 school days missed due to suspensions. The absenteeism due to disciplinary reasons is especially concerning because of the potential negative impact absenteeism has on student achievement. A student who is out for 5+ days will find it difficult if not impossible to catch up on the school work missed.

It is also important to consider the potential problems for the community of having those middle school students at large in the community during the school day.

Additionally, another extremely worrying aspect of these discipline numbers is, that, as noted above, with regard to referrals and suspensions, although African-American students represent less that one fifth of the student population (18% of 950 or around 171 students), those same African-American students account for more than half of the 5+ day suspensions (54% of 37 or around 20 of them) i.e., the suspensions for serious, level three offences.

Working with the numbers reveals that at a minimum 332 (though probably many more) school days were lost to disciplinary issues by the approximately 171 black/African American students – almost 2 days per student on average.

So, Principal D not only has to contend with difficult problems with the school's disciplinary system, he is also forced to contend with the realization, that his schoolmay be guilty of institutionalized systemic racism.

Document 3
Excerpt from Faculty and Student Survey Results (current year)

	Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing	
	Faculty (88% responding)	**Students (90% responding)**
Students feel respected and supported in their classes.	90%	51%
Students feel respected in common spaces of the school.	85%	53%
Student diversity is appreciated and all students' cultures are respected.	93%	51%
There is a welcoming atmosphere of trust and collaboration between students and staff.	96%	57%
Classroom rules and expectations are clear and consistent.	88%	46%
Classroom rules and expectations support a safe environment for learning.	96%	49%
All students are consistently treated fairly.	96%	46%

	Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing	
	Faculty (88% responding)	Students (90% responding)
Discipline problems are handled fairly according to the Code of Conduct.	93%	44%
Consequences for discipline infractions are fair and communicated clearly.	94%	49%

Views expressed by 5 or more teachers:

- All students are treated fairly and equitably.
- I make sure that my students feel respected and supported at all times.
- Teachers and staff promote safety in all areas of the school.
- Teachers all follow the Code of Conduct, which students appreciate.

Views expressed by 5 or more students:

- My teachers are always threatening me and my friends with referrals.
- Some students don't get referrals, when others get them for the exact same thing. It's not fair.
- I get referrals but no one tells me what I've done wrong.
- I get a Level 2 [or 3] consequence for Level 1 [or 2] infraction.

Discussion:

One cannot miss the astonishing discrepancy between the adults' responses to the questionnaire and the responses of the students. Of course, anyone who has worked in a middle school or even had children of their own of middle school age, is aware that pre- and early- teens often don't see eye-to-eye with adults, especially where matters of discipline are involved. It's certainly not surprising to hear a middle school child's plaintive cry: *THAT'S NOT FAIR!*

Nevertheless, these questionnaire responses, in conjunction with all the problems with the disciplinary system discussed above, show a critical divide betweenthe faculty's perception of the school's disciplinary program, which is overwhelmingly positive with regard to issues like fairness and respect, and the much more negative perception of the disciplinary process as viewed through the students' eyes.

For example, as noted earlier, 96% of faculty respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "All students are consistently treated fairly," while only 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 94% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Consequences for discipline infractions are fair and communicated clearly," while only 49% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

This faculty-student disconnect relates directly to the possibility of systemic racism in the school as illustrated by the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for black/African American students. Unfortunately, the questionnaire responses are not disaggregated by race, so we cannot tell if race is a significant factor in the questionnaire responses. But one suspects the black/African American students' responses would most likely be even more negative than those of the student body as a whole.

SELECTED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Following are four selected response questions from the leadership exam study guide together with some discussion. As noted above, in my review classes, after carefully reviewing the anecdotal material and the three data documents, I arrange the students in groups of three or four to work on the selected response questions. However, in addition to selecting the correct or *best* response – on which we have the State's opinion – I ask them to explain why each of the *other* responses is not as good as the State's answer.

6. Based on the information provided, the most urgent concern for Mr. D and school leaders at Bridgemere is:

A. the low percentage of students who feel that they are treated fairly and respectfully at school.

B. assessment scores that reflect achievement gaps for students who are English language learners and students with disabilities.

C. uncertainty about behavior infraction levels and the high number of discipline referrals for all infraction levels.

D.the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for AfricanAmerican, economically disadvantaged, and male students.

Correct Response: D. This item requires examinees to apply knowledge of skills and strategies for recognizing and confronting implicit and institutional biases that impede access and opportunity. The district superintendent alerted Mr. D to the growing achievement gap for students, a concern that is underscored by disaggregated state assessment results from the past three years. However, parents/guardians expressed greater concern about the school discipline practices. Discipline referral and suspension rates, as well as student responses to the survey, clearly indicate that disproportionality in discipline rates for students who are African American, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students who are male is the most urgent concern facing Mr. D and his leadership team. (New York State Education Department 2020 Study Guide)

Discussion:

This can be a difficult answer to explain because all four of the issues mentioned in the choices listed should be of urgent concern. The key word/phrase is "…MOST urgent concern …" The challenge for the administrative candidate is to select the choice that is of GREATEST concern which might seem to be a matter of opinion.

However, the Supreme Court has provided us with some guidance in situations like this by developing the following framework as to how to rate the relative level of concern for an issue as shown in the chart below (Brimley,et.al, 2020).

Levels of Concern	
Level	**Issues**
Strict Scrutiny	Discrimination against a suspect class (based on race, creed, national origin) or fundamental rights
Intermediate Scrutiny	Gender, age and disability
Rational Relationship Scrutiny	A rational relationship exists between the activity and a legitimate state interest

Neither Choice A nor Choice C involve a suspect class or discrimination against it. Moreover, disciplinary activities are there to serve a legitimate state interest to maintain order. For Choice B it should be noted that neither English language learners nor students with disabilities are suspect classes of the strict scrutiny variety and establishing their progress based on test scores serves a legitimate state interest.

Only Choice D fits the strict scrutiny requirements as explained by the test writers in their explanation.

7. After reviewing the state assessment data, Mr. D recognizes that he needs additional information in order to understand the root causes of achievement gaps at Bridgemere. Which action should be his highest priority in continuing to evaluate the school's learning environment?

A. reviewing referral rates by classroom and meeting with teachers and school counselors to determine if student support systems are in use in all classrooms

B. disaggregating student achievement data by classroom to identify teachers in need of professional learning related to culturally responsive instruction

C. meeting with all special education and English as a new language faculty to determine if they have adequate resources to support student learning

D. working with teacher-leaders across grades to determine if teachers are using instructional practices that support active learning and student engagement

Correct Response: A. This item requires examinees to apply knowledge of skills and strategies for establishing and sustaining coherent and equitable systems of academic, behavioral, and social supports to meet the needs of all students. Because achievement gaps at Bridgemere overlap significantly with the impact disproportionality in discipline referrals and suspensions, Mr. D should prioritize analyzing discipline practices as he evaluates the learning environment. In particular, Mr. D needs to determine if some teachers at Bridgemere are issuing higher numbers of discipline referrals than others, in particular to students who are African American, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students who are male. Mr. D also needs to know if equitable student support systems are in place at Bridgemere and fully in use in all classrooms. (New York State Education Department 2020 Study Guide)

Discussion:

Problem #7 begins where Problem #6 ended with continuing story of Principal D's emerging awareness of the possibility that his school may be guilty of systemic racism. With Problem #6 we saw that Principal D's most urgent concern was *Choice D*: T*he disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

We now examine the four choices to determine which choice offers the best strategy for addressing his most urgent concern.

Choice B: *Disaggregating student achievement data by classroom to identify teachers in need of professional learning related to culturally responsive instruction,* might be a good strategy to employ eventually, because some of the teachers may need professional development. But that does not directly address the problems with the disciplinary system, namely, *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

Choice C:*Meeting with all special education and English as a new language faculty to determine if they have adequate resources to support student learning*, might also be a good strategy eventually, but again, it does not directly address Principal D's most urgent concern about the disciplinary system, i.e., *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

Choice D: *Working with teacher-leaders across grades to determine if teachers are using instructional practices that support active learning and student engagement*, might, similarly, be a strategy Principal D might want to eventually employ. However, again, this strategy is not targeted toward Principal D's most urgent concern about the disciplinary system, *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students*.

Only Choice A directly addresses the problems with the disciplinary system, specifically, *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.* And that is why Choice A, *reviewing referral rates by classroom and meeting with teachers and school counselors to determine if student support systems are in use in all classrooms*, should be Principal D's highest priority as he continues to further evaluate the school's learning environment.

8. Mr. D plans to hold a series of meetings focused on improving school culture at Bridgemere. Based on the survey results and on his interactions with teachers and teacher-leaders, Mr. D can best ensure that faculty and staff recognize the need for improvement by sharing which type of information at the outset of the meetings?

  A. state assessment results, disaggregated by student groups
  B. a comparison of discipline referral rates across schools in the district
  C. a side-by-side comparison of faculty and student responses to the survey
  D. discipline referral rates, alongside excerpts from the school Code of Conduct

Correct Response: C. This item requires examinees to apply knowledge of skills and strategies for using data to evaluate the school culture and learning environment and employing situationally appropriate strategies in support of a positive and inclusive school culture and learning environment. In the materials that Mr. D has already gathered, one particularly striking detail is the divergence between faculty and student responses to the survey. For example, 96% of faculty respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "All students are consistently treated fairly," while only 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

Similarly, 94% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Consequences for discipline infractions are fair and communicated clearly," while only 49% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

Presented side by side, these responses should serve as a powerful message to faculty and staff that improvement is needed(New York State Education Department 2020 Study Guide).

Discussion:

With Problem #6 we saw that Principal D's most urgent concern was Choice D. *The disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

With problem #7 we saw that Principal D's efforts to further evaluate the school's learning environment were best achieved with Choice A: *Reviewing referral rates by classroom and meeting with teachers and school counselors to determine if student support systems are in use in all classrooms.*

That was because Choice A was the option most closely connected to his most urgent concern, *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

Problem #8 continues the saga of Principal D's emerging awareness of the possibility that his school, may be guilty of systemic racism. Now armed with somewhat explosive data in the results of the faculty-student survey, Principal D wants to determine the best way to share his concerns with the faculty. The tests authors, in offering their explanation for why Choice C is the correct choice, clearly express some of the most sensational results of the survey that display the obvious disconnect between faculty and student views of the school's learning environment. This disconnect relates directly to the possibility of systemic racism in the school as illustrated by the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.

It seems clear that Principal. D can best ensure that faculty and staff recognize the need for improvement by sharing Choice C: *a side-by-side comparison of faculty and student responses to the survey*To further establish that choice C is the best choice and better than the other three, we consider that Choice A: *state assessment results, disaggregated by student groups*, while important, are nowhere near as dramatic as Choice C: *a side-by-side comparison of faculty and student responses to the survey.*

Choice B*: a comparison of discipline referral rates across schools in the district*, though possibly interesting, is not immediately relevant to Mr. D's objective of ensuring that faculty and staff recognize the need for improvement with regard to the obvious disconnect between faculty and student views of the school's learning environment. This disconnect relates directly to the possibility of systemic racism in the school as illustrated by *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.*

Finally, Choice D: *discipline referral rates, alongside excerpts from the school Code of Conduct*, is not immediately connected to race and Mr. D's most urgent concern about *the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students* which suggests the possibility of systemic racism in the school.

9. Mr. D facilitates an all-staff meeting focused on disciplinary process and suspensions at Bridgemere. During the meeting, some teachers question whether the leadership team's concern about this issue is warranted. While acknowledging that there are exceptions, several teachers contend that faculty and staff are generally consistent and fair in issuing referrals. Others add that referrals and suspensions are important tools for managing student behavior. Mr. D can best begin to address the teachers' comments by pointing out that:

A. discipline referrals during the previous school year were approximately 300 percent of total student enrollment.
B. survey responses show that a majority of faculty members do not believe that discipline referrals negatively affect students.
C. high rates of referrals and suspensions for some student groups indicate that the school has failed to recognize institutional biases.
D. referrals and suspensions have not been successful in promoting positive student behavior or improving student achievement levels.

Correct Response: C. This item requires examinees to apply knowledge of skills and strategies for articulating core values and maintaining a school culture of high expectations, equity and inclusiveness, and

shared commitment to and accountability for social justice and confronting disproportionality. Discipline referrals and suspension rates provide clear evidence of disproportionality that is negatively affecting students at Bridgemere who are African American, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students who are male. Faced with faculty and staff resistance, Mr. D's most appropriate response is to direct attention to these data and emphasize that this evidence clearly demonstrates institutional biases that must be confronted and overcome. (New York State Education Department 2020 Study Guide)

Discussion:

In problem #9, Principal D facilitates an all-staff meeting focused on disciplinary process and suspensions at Bridgemere to address his most urgent concern about the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students and the possibility that his school, however unwittingly, may be guilty of systemic racism.

Neither of the teacher's comments: *that faculty and staff are generally consistent and fair in issuing referrals* and that *referrals and suspensions are important tools for managing student behavior* directly address the issue of disproportionate impact of referrals and suspensions as well as the possibility of racial bias in the disciplinary process.

Neither do Choices A, B and D.

Choice A: *discipline referrals during the previous school year were approximately 300 percent of total student enrollment,* is about the number of referrals, not the disproportionate rates of referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.

Choice B: *survey responses show that a majority of faculty members do not believe that discipline referrals negatively affect students,* is similarly not connected to the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.

Finally, Choice D: *referrals and suspensions have not been successful in promoting positive student behavior or improving student achievementlevels,*also is not connected to the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students.

Because the other choices are not connected to the disproportionate rates of discipline referrals and suspensions for African American, economically disadvantaged, and male students, Principal D should direct attention to these data and emphasize that this evidence clearly demonstrates institutional biases that must be confronted and overcome.

NEXT STEPS

To review, Principal D is taking over as principal of a mixed-race urban middle school with less than stellar academic results and a growing performance gap between the white and African-American students. The disciplinary system is dysfunctional and shows evidence of racial bias. Additionally, there is a disturbing disconnect between the faculty's mostly oblivious attitude toward fairness and respect with regard to diversity and the students' deep dissatisfaction with the faculty's attitudes and behavior as shown by the faculty/student questionnaire.

Returning to the five stages of action research from pages 2 and 3 of this document, we find Principal D has selected a focus area – school culture (phase 1) and conducted a needs assessment both through anecdotal information – scenario - and through the three data documents (phase 2). Principal D is now at the at the third phase of the action research process where he must design an action plan (phase 3), carry it out (phase 4) and then evaluate its effects and revise (phase 5).

One possible way for Principal D to proceed might be to build on Reeves' research on 90-90-90 schools as a way to improve student performance and to close the achievement gaps with regard to race.

As defined by Reeves, 90-90-90 schools have the following:

- More than 90 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, a commonly used surrogate for low-income families.
- More than 90 percent of the students are from ethnic minorities.

- More than 90 percent of the students met or achieved high academic standards according to independently conducted tests of academic achievement. (Reeves, 2001, p 186)

After extensive study of such schools, Reeves and his team found five characteristics that were common to all 90-90-90schools. These characteristics were:
- A focus on academic achievement
- Clear curriculum choices
- Frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement
- An emphasis on nonfiction writing
- Collaborative scoring of student work (Reeves,2001,p 187)

Reeves and his team wanted to know if using the five 90-90-90 practices listed above would improve achievement and close the equity gap in schools like Bridgemere that are not, technically speaking, 90-90-90 schools. For one thing, Bridgemere is not 90% black/African American. Additionally, the Reeves team also noted that the ultimate test of the 90-90-90 research approach is whether it is sustainable and replicable.They found that Simpson (2003) has provided compelling evidence that the practices of the 90-90-90 schools can be applied in a diverse urban environment with similar results that are sustainable and replicable.   (Reeves, 2001,p 194)

After visiting all of the 90-90-90 schools, Reeves and his team noticed profound differences between the assessment and instructional practices of the 90-90-90 schools and those of low-achieving schools. He writes:

> First and most importantly, the 90-90-90schools had a laser-like focus on student achievement. The most casual observer could not walk down a hallway without seeing charts, graphs, and tables that displayed student achievement information, as well as data about the continuous improvement students had made. The data were on display not only in principals' offices, but also throughout the schools. In addition, we saw school trophy cases full of exemplary academic work, including clear, concise essays, wonderful science projects, terrific social studies papers, and outstanding mathematics papers. In short, the 90-90-90schools made it clear to the most casual observer that academic performance was highly prized. (Reeves, 2001,p 187)

So, there is evidence to suggest that building on Reeves' 90-90-90 schools work would be a good place for Principal D to begin.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As noted, as Principal D takes over as principal at Bridgemere, he will certainly have his hands full. Consider some of the duties of a principal:

The principal is a **manager**. As chief financial officer of the building, the principal is responsible for developing and managing the budget as well as other business-related activities (Brimley, Jr. et al, 2016).

The principal is a **supervisor.** The principal is in charge of the recruitment, hiring, training, evaluating and either retaining or terminating of staff (Glickman, et al., 2016).

The principal has **curriculum responsibilities**. Will there be tracking? If so, how will students be placed? What support programs will the school offer and how will they be run? Will there be curricular innovations like a STEM program? What extra-curricular and/or co-curricular programs will the school sponsor? (Oliva, et al., 2016).

The principal is the school's **leader**. In his/her capacity as leader, it is the principal's job to communicate to the school community, the school's vision, goals, values and objectives(Glickman, et al., 2016).

Now in addition to all these responsibilities, Principal D will need to develop and lead a program of local action research to address the specific needs of his school's culture especially with regard to race. That, in turn, will mean identifying, culling, analyzing and interpreting data that lead to an effective program for change for the school. The material from the School Building LeadershipExam has a wealth of material that can help him in this process.

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