Recent years have brought new calls to dismantle discriminatory policies and practices in U.S. schools. But adopting an equity focus doesn’t guarantee the desired results. There’s a risk that doing equity will be toothless—surface level and designed more to avoid tension and blame than to build a better educational system.

In Leading Your School Toward Equity, veteran educator Dwayne Chism shows district, school, and teacher leaders a four-step process for taking equity work beyond talk and into effective action. You’ll learn concrete ways to

- **Define and clarify equity.** Guide even reluctant staff to a consensus understanding of what equity is, why it’s necessary, and what it will look like.
- **Create productive discomfort.** Use intentional dialogue to lead staff to a place where they can talk frankly about privilege, bias, racial inequality, and how these affect the experience of schooling.
- **Build efficacy.** Help staff develop higher levels of individual and shared professional efficacy—the number-one factor influencing equitable educational outcomes—and create an empowered group of educational equity allies united for results.
- **Normalize action.** Support the day-to-day use of an equity lens, a mindset that empowers all teachers to counteract stereotypes and rectify conditions that negatively affect students of color.

To make this complicated work a little easier, Chism provides an array of assessments, coaching guides, and activities to use with staff. If you’re committed to creating a true equity-driven culture, if you’re ready for courageous leadership, this book is for you.

—Baruti K. Kafele, bestselling author of The Equity and Social Justice Education 50
Introduction
A Reflection on Education

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
—James Baldwin

It’s state testing day. The 6th grade teachers and students are in the cafeteria, going over the time constraints and expectations for taking the reading portion of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Among them is an 11-year-old Black boy, anxiously waiting to begin his test. Once the teachers have gone over the instructions, they ask for any questions and then deliver the fatal last words: “Good luck!”

The boy has his approach planned. He begins flipping through the testing booklet, searching for the shortest passages to read and respond to first. A sense of learned helplessness tells him that he is different from the other students, and his environment has taught him that success depends on completing the test on time.

Forty-five minutes pass. Students are putting down their pencils, having filled in the last of the multiple-choice response bubbles. Each time the boy hears a pencil drop, an internal voice reminds him that he’s not as smart as the white kids. In an effort to silence that voice, he grabs hold of another strategy he’s relied on before: when in doubt, choose C.

This book, Leading Your School Toward Equity, is 40 years in the making. My thoughts and ideas around race and equity began to form the minute I
walked through the school doors to start my journey in education. As early as kindergarten, I encountered questions about why my skin was brown and began to realize I was not like my classmates. During learning time, I thought my brain was more challenged than the brains of white students, and this was affirmed each time the teacher praised their quick thinking when responding to her questions.

I was that 11-year-old Black boy sitting in the cafeteria, and I was anxious during that test, and most tests, because I was afraid of being exposed academically. My strategy of choosing C was undoubtedly flawed. But when I reflect on my experiences in education, I find myself in an awkward space mentally. If it were not for the education I received, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Yet, although I’ve earned a doctoral degree and experienced success professionally, the residual effects of the systemic conditions I faced as a student remain with me to this day.

Looking back, I’m not going to claim that any of the numerous teachers I had were racist. I also believe that most of them had good intentions. What I will attest to is that my skin color had an immense effect on my educational experience. It contributed to the opportunities that were available or unavailable to me; to the types of relationships I formed; and to a self-consciousness propelled by the threat of being stereotyped. Despite the asserted purpose of schools to support the learning of all, watching the daily experiences of students who did and did not look like me taught me that equity is not a given. For me, getting an education was more about survival than the joy of learning. And my ability to learn was often handicapped by a desire to hide my deficiencies from peers and teachers.

In looking at the current landscape in education, I believe I’m one of the lucky ones. So many students of color struggle today to overcome the negative effects of having to endure systemic challenges associated with race.

A Purposeful Path to Disrupting Inequity

Although I have found renewed hope in the resurgent interest in equitable education, I fear that the notion of doing equity may become the new wolf in sheep’s clothing—“nice” ways to evade the deeper-rooted issues and long-standing problems related to racial bias. Much like educators’ attempts with No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, or Every Student Succeeds, adopting
an equity focus doesn’t guarantee the desired result. Unless we commit to taking bold action, our attempts at equity will simply impersonate genuine responsiveness to demands for improvement and ultimately maintain the status quo (Parish & Arends, 1983).

Because traditional educational systems have failed to bring about the type of institutional reform that dismantles policies and practices resulting in discrimination, it’s incumbent on today’s leaders to find transformative ways to meet the educational needs of all students. Although there are many books that focus on building teachers’ cultural competency, I wrote this book specifically to guide district, school, and teacher leaders in forming an equity-driven culture. Ultimately, classroom teachers’ success in meeting the demands of equity depends on competent individuals leading change.

Of course, the focus on school-based leadership does not excuse local school boards and other forms of higher bureaucracy from reimagining policies and practices to support students of color. I have seen for myself the continual pressure school leaders feel to produce equitable outcomes in learning, even as they are forced to operate within larger systems that continue to permit and promote practices that persistently marginalize groups.

However, the hour for change is upon us. Policies need to shift, and school leaders cannot afford to wait for the cavalry. They must be catalysts for change, bringing transformation to their circles of influence. They must courageously deny appeals for “softer” approaches to equity that are driven by a one-culture narrative and seemingly designed more to avoid tension and blame than to build a better educational system that truly serves all.

I wrote this book to help leaders chart a purposeful path toward equity. Leaders will learn how to help their staff both acknowledge and address conditions that promote racial inequality. In light of recent discussions regarding social injustice and the need for antiracism (Kendi, 2019; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020), my approach to achieving equity involves securing a force of educational equity allies—educators who interrupt practices that incubate intolerance within their learning spaces. These educators persistently educate themselves about the manifestation of racial injustice within their environment, use their position to prevent students from being oppressed, and take explicit action to educate others. If you dare push your organization to confront racial inequality, this book will support you as you develop such allies.
Although much of this book acknowledges the plight of Black students in our schools, the ideas apply to all disparaged groups. I focus on Black students here to acknowledge that across the United States, they face harsher conditions than others within our schools. But rest assured, this book guides leaders to act in ways that enable all students to better connect to the classroom, teacher, and educational system. In the words of Maya Angelou, “I speak to the Black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition.”

Educators should see this book not only as a guide to uncover the root causes of educational disparities but also as a tool to disrupt oppressive environments. Reaching a state of equity will require a well-strategized plan, and this book—and its accompanying sets of downloadable resources (handouts at www.ascd.org/EquityLeadershipHandouts and the Appendix’s tools at www.ascd.org/EquityLeadershipToolset)—will help you build that plan. But know that this is not a one-time process; it’s a continual and an intentional way in which to walk.

A Courageous Journey

Thank you for setting off on this journey. Seeking to lead for equity requires boldness and a willingness to shake and shift school culture. However, leaders who dare to take this step are rightfully wary of what they will be facing. As Radd and colleagues (2021) write, “It is easy to get trapped by fear of others’ backlash when you take a stand for greater equity” (p. 29). Fear is a given; it’s how we choose to respond to that fear that defines our character.

As an analogy, consider stepping into a crowded elevator. The door slowly closes, and what happens next? Most of us will behave in fairly predictable ways: We remain silent, avoid making eye contact, shift our gaze to the ceiling or the floor, or consult our watch or cell phone. It’s a little 30-second experience, and yet it’s a powerful image of what commonly happens when we sense that everyone’s personal space has been invaded and we don’t want to appear threatening.

Engaging in equity work will begin much like this elevator experience. The moment someone drops the word race, awkwardness is injected into the environment. Some people in the room will become silent, avoid making eye contact, avoid conversation, start looking up, start looking down, or consult
their watch or cell phone. Some people will want to get off the topic of race as quickly as some want to get off that elevator. They may fear the vulnerability such conversations bring. They may fear saying or doing something that will offend. Of course, it’s also possible that some may quickly become annoyed and openly express their opposition to continuing the conversation. School leaders can’t let any of these factors—awkwardness, trepidation, or hostility—dissuade them from guiding others to challenge the conditions that propagate racial bias, segregation, and harm. It’s essential to push forward despite any impulse of avoidance generated by fear.

Before you start down this road, turn the page and take the assessment shown in Figure I.1. It will help you gauge your baseline knowledge and comfort levels in leading others through conversations about inequality and racism. When you have completed reading this book, and after you have engaged in the suggested activities and reflected on your learning, I’ll ask you to retake the very same assessment to document how you have grown as an equity leader. Ultimately, success with this journey will come down to one thing—courageous leadership—and that requires going far beyond the motions of just “doing equity.”
**FIGURE I.1**

**Leading for Equity: A Pre-Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable having conversations about conditions of inequality or</td>
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<tr>
<td>racism.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable taking the lead in guiding others through conversations</td>
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<td>that seek to build their awareness around conditions of inequality or</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>racism.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable delivering truthful coaching and feedback to support</td>
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<tr>
<td>others in identifying and addressing instructional practices that are</td>
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<tr>
<td>culturally unresponsive.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with my ability to help others gain the skills necessary</td>
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<td>to effectively advocate for equity when seeing daily circumstances</td>
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<td>associated with racial overtones.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable leading others in using data to disrupt racial inequities</td>
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<td>in my building or district and to establish sound strategies for</td>
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<tr>
<td>improvement.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with my ability to self-reflect regularly to uncover any</td>
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<td>hidden biases and stereotypes I may possess.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with my level of understanding around what signifies</td>
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<td>equity to effectively guide others within my school or district</td>
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<tr>
<td>environment in understanding.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with my ability to provide a sense of value and belief</td>
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<td>within staff that leads to greater outcomes for marginalized students.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with my ability to routinely step outside myself to</td>
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<td>learn how my present reality influenced by race compares with the reality</td>
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<tr>
<td>of others.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
“We are responsible for our own ignorance or, with time
and openhearted enlightenment, our own wisdom.”
—Isabel Wilkerson

While I was giving a presentation to a room full of K–12 leaders, I asked them to take out a piece of paper and engage in a quick quiz. “Using the race groups white, nonwhite Hispanic, Black, and Asian,” I began, “numerically rank those groups according to where you believe each would fall in terms of academic achievement data. Do this first in reading and then in math.”

Having conducted this exercise in multiple settings over the years, I was confident of the results. They would unanimously rank Black students at the bottom, with Hispanic students sitting directly above; there would be mixed reviews regarding which group—Asian or white students—would sit at the top. And that is exactly what they did this time, too. I then asked the attendees what we could learn about equity and race from this exercise, once again accurately predicting how they would respond. Bodies shifted uncomfortably, with attendees either unsure of the answer or uncertain of how to talk openly about the obvious. I let them off the hook and shared the following: This exercise is a stark reminder of the current reality concerning equity and race in many of our schools. Race, or skin tone, continues to be an indicator of educational outcomes.
Although we maintain that our schools are institutions designed to open doors and create pathways to a bright and promising future, the odds continue to be unfavorably stacked against students of color. As Smith and colleagues (2017) point out, “Few would disagree with the statement that a child’s last name, skin color, or family income should never determine his or her future. But the systems and operational structures in schools and classrooms can do just that” (p. 72). Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan expressed a similar thought, noting that “the undeniable truth is that the everyday educational experience for too many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise” (Lewis, 2012, para. 5).

The simple explanation for these inequities often includes a narrative of poverty, uninvolved parents, limited exposure to a variety of experiences, or lack of resources. These factors certainly play a role in the educational trials faced by children living in such circumstances. What they cannot explain, however, is why the racial achievement gap continues to exist among students even when they share similar socioeconomic backgrounds and go to the same schools (Reardon, 2016). There must be something more.

The Hunt for Equity

For schools across the United States, the continuous school improvement process serves as a crucial lever in reaching equity and generating student success. However, the standard process of diagnosing the data, creating a plan, implementing the plan, monitoring progress, and increasing activity has not solved this problem. Schools spend vast amounts of time engaging staff in advancing various strategies, only to find that achievement data continue to reveal gaps in opportunity and learning for our most vulnerable population—students of color.

I want to be clear: The intention of the school improvement process is not in itself a roadblock to equity. The problem resides in approaches that work against improvement efforts. Here are some of them:

- **Protecting staff morale.** Seeking to keep the peace often translates into using softer approaches while working with staff on continuous improvement. To keep adults happy, schools may attempt to build a
positive culture by focusing on what’s going well, overlooking crucial deficits.

- **Focusing on compliance.** Schools may overemphasize the actions, forms, or tasks that staff need to complete but pay little attention to how things are done or the relevance of the strategies selected.

- **Living in the wrong “circle.”** School improvement efforts can be halted by focusing on what Stephen Covey (1989) refers to as the circle of concern. The circle of concern encompasses areas beyond the control of the school, such as a student’s home life. Choosing to focus on outside factors distracts attention from more crucial issues that are within the school’s purview.

- **Failing to promote data literacy.** Staff members need to understand how to use data to uncover root causes and identify promising practices. If schools don’t spend adequate time building data literacy, stakeholders will be unable to track genuine progress in current conditions. Data illiteracy often translates into distrust in data.

- **Focusing on all students.** Schools may avoid addressing or acknowledging disparaging differences among demographic groups, such as ignoring disparities in suspension data to instead address all student suspensions. The misguided assumption is that the same strategies affect all students equally.

- **Laying the blame on students.** Schools may see students as the problem and solution to continuous improvement. In this view, students need to change for school climate to change. Therefore, strategies and conversations ignore how adult actions contribute to student experiences.

**Effort: It’s Not Enough**

Let’s look at a school that demonstrated a few of these common tendencies when implementing the continuous school improvement process.

Terry, a fifth-year middle school principal in an urban school district, worked with his staff on responding to trend data indicating a disproportionality in suspensions and academic achievement regarding students of color; the latter represented approximately 48 percent of the student population. Terry noticed that office referrals of Black male students were higher than
that of the general population. He also observed that teachers were routinely sending minority students to the office for “disrespectful behavior” when they were not sending nonminority students who displayed the same or similar behavior.

Teachers in the building voiced their frustration with minority students in the following ways: “We’re doing the best we can under the circumstances”; “Our Black male students are not always focused or motivated to learn”; “Many of our Black students struggle with showing respect to one another and to staff”; and “It’s hard to hold our Black students accountable when they aren’t held to the same expectations and don’t receive the necessary academic support from home.”

As part of his multiyear improvement plan, Terry guided staff in looking at subgroup data to determine specific areas of concern and agree on action steps. During the first two years, the staff focused on improving students’ buildingwide behavior. Staff members felt that a repaired student culture would lead to increased academic outcomes for minority students. Because this approach resulted in only small changes in behavior and stagnant academic growth, the staff decided to focus on interactions with students and instructional practices that specifically spoke to diverse learners. As a result, they looked to culturally responsive schooling and restorative practices to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of their diverse population.

At the end of the fifth year, the data in Terry’s building indicated some success but fell short of the goals the school had set out to attain. Overall, student discipline issues had decreased, but a racial disparity in student suspensions continued. Academic data showed a similar trend; although achievement increased overall, there were minimal gains in closing the achievement gap. Staff members felt the culture as a whole was improving, but they were frustrated that the data didn’t reward the effort they were putting in. Terry also noticed improvement within the culture and with teacher practices, but he was frustrated, too. He needed to find more effective ways to influence and energize staff in response to the data.

Coherence and Adherence: The Way Forward

I have seen this challenge to achieve equity mirrored in multiple experiences I’ve had as a teacher, principal, principal supervisor, and coach. Terry and his
staff worked hard during those five years, but the results were nevertheless discouraging. So why did the gains not match their efforts?

The missing piece was coherence. Although Terry and his staff were moving in the direction of equity, they fixated on actions instead of creating a sound structure that would support a deep awareness of equity. Coherence, according to Fullan and Quinn (2016), consists of a common depth of understanding (individual and collective) about the purpose and nature of the work, the key phrase here being depth of understanding. Equity remains elusive in schools when there is no robust organizational understanding among staff members about why equity is needed and how to genuinely obtain it. This requires a larger cycle of inquiry. Although actions and initiatives alone often succeed in creating better conditions for all students, they typically fall short in demonstrating better outcomes for students of color (Gregory et al., 2018; Hollie, 2012).

Nevertheless, there's hope for leaders like Terry. Every student can succeed if we commit to the right practices over time. Leading Your School Toward Equity speaks to how leaders and schools can create the conditions that will enable continuous improvement initiatives to thrive. Figure 1.1 shows the four-step Equity Leadership Framework that will guide this work:

1. **Define and clarify equity.** Leaders craft a systematic approach that builds consensus around a standard definition and vision of equity. Everyone comes to understand why the work is so crucial.

2. **Create discomfort.** Leaders promote intentional and continual dialogue about equity and race. They monitor the influence of these conversations, even when they're challenging to hold.

3. **Build efficacy.** Leaders establish a unified culture where adults possess high levels of individual and collective efficacy. Again, everyone needs to be on the same page about effectively educating students of color. If they’re not, it can set back the culture.

4. **Normalize action.** Leaders operationalize action inside classrooms and throughout the school. They focus on the actions needed to create consistent, sustained success over time.

As the framework shows, leaders are at the heart of implementation. Realizing equity calls for sound leadership that models what Lee J. Colan
and Julie Davis-Colan (2013) refer to as *adherence*, which is the ability to consistently execute. According to Colan and Davis-Colan, consistency in execution requires *focus*, *competence*, and *passion* from leadership. In the upcoming chapters, we will be looking at ways to build a solid foundation of practice in the key areas of the Equity Leadership Framework, with a central theme of shaping leadership actions that demonstrate adherence. To this end, leadership actions should

- Align with the nature and scope of the work (focus);
- Demonstrate the knowledge and wherewithal to lead the work (competence); and
- Display the obligation and desire to do what is right in the face of inequity (passion).

**FIGURE 1.1**

Equity Leadership Framework
The goal of each upcoming chapter is to empower schools to break the cycle of inequality. As Chip and Dan Heath (2010) note, “Ultimately, all change efforts boil down to the same mission: Can you get people to start behaving in a new way?” (p. 4). Failure to demonstrate adherence will cause the culture to abort strategy and rally around maintaining the status quo. Because the role of leadership is so crucial to success, each chapter concludes with a section titled “Next Steps for Leaders.” This not only calls attention to the importance of leadership, but also gives leaders the opportunity to reflect on how they might demonstrate the focus, competence, and passion needed to effectively guide equity work.

**LEADERSHIP TIP**

Along this journey, you will experience times when you feel mentally exhausted, but mental exhaustion is not an indication that it’s time to abandon the work. On the contrary. Push through these moments. Remind yourself often of the moral imperative you are carrying out. Whether you’re in an urban setting with a racially diverse population or a rural setting with little to no racial diversity, all educators should take this journey. All students deserve educators who are attuned to the racial aspects of equity and who can craft optimal learning experiences that prepare them to be advocates for all forms of justice in society (Pate, 2020). Just as important, although your environment may not have racial diversity today, you never know where you might be tomorrow. Keep fighting the good fight.

**Making the Most of Time**

As a former building leader myself, I understand that one of the biggest enemies to continuous school improvement efforts is time. I also recognize that in the world of education, there’s never *enough* time, so success comes down to how educators prioritize or strategically use the time they have.

The Equity Leadership Framework is not simply another idea to add to a long list of things you have already tried. This framework develops coherence around the work we should and *must* be doing to change the game for students who are fighting against predictable outcomes. This is not to exclude other strategies that you’re currently engaged in, but this work does demand a cohesive mentality around equity that must come first. The Equity Leadership Framework is about the daily way in which staff should walk.
Next Steps for Leaders: Commit to the Work

*Actions speak louder than words.* Achieving equity will take more than just words. Commit to taking the necessary actions to provide an environment that remains in tune with the experiences of those who come from various backgrounds and conditions. This means building a level of coherence that eradicates blinders constructed around race (Delpit, 1995). Because you are the leading factor in creating and sustaining environmental change, the commitment starts with you.

*Ask yourself…*
- What are my tendencies when approaching school improvement?
- To what extent do I have clarity of purpose around the work of equity?
- As a leader, how do I exhibit focus, competence, and passion?
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