



EQUITY IN FOCUS

Angela M. Ward

MEET RACIST INCIDENTS HEAD-ON WITH A CRISIS PLAN

When a racist incident occurred at one of the schools in my district, the community was unprepared to deal with the ensuing crisis. School leaders had a crisis intervention plan at their disposal, which worked well when a student attempted suicide or a member of the community died, yet no one considered it as a tool to intervene in this situation.

As an antiracist leader, I've always strived to make connections and not give people one more thing to add to their plate, so I set out to make the connection to the crisis plan explicit. Immediately, I recognized that there was a breakdown in communication and a lack of processes and protocols.

The strife and stress among the students, teachers, families, and community members were palpable. Throughout the process, I would need to keep our focus on supporting the social, emotional, and mental health of the student body and staff, including the students who caused harm.

I was particularly concerned about and responsive to the needs of the students and staff to whom the racial offense was directed. I identified with those who felt harmed, and I owned my position as a black person who was deeply impacted by the incident.

I reviewed the crisis plan and walked through the quick reference steps to determine the expected degree of trauma in the school, based on the who, how, and where of the situation. Who? The students were popular, everyone knew them. How? The incident was enacted through social media. Where? The incident had occurred off campus, but the reach of social media had made the issue visible and the harm repeatable across the community. The expected degree of trauma based on the simple formula in the quick reference steps was off the charts.

Because stress and tensions were high and the trauma pronounced, I knew I had to address the highly charged racial incident head-on and hand in hand with both school leadership and the community. I met with the campus principal, assistant principals, their leadership team, parents, students, and community members.

I then did a deep dive with leaders because my role in the district was one of antiracist professional learning design, implementation, and coaching support for leaders. I discussed the crisis intervention process with the principal, and we worked to adapt it for this situation.

I asked the leaders whom they had called the week before to support the community when the campus was dealing with a suicide attempt. How could we get their support with this incident as well?

I knew that our work had to go beyond responding to understanding what enabled the incident in the first place. One major barrier was that the principal, teachers, and staff were not comfortable discussing the taboo subject of race. That discomfort was paralyzing to them, and they saw no way to address the volatile situation that the racist incident had caused.

I engaged the leaders in critically self-reflective activities designed to bring issues to the surface and uncover the true campus culture. We found a campus culture that led students involved in

Continued on p. 18



LEARN MORE

For more on the importance of and strategies for self-care for antiracist leaders, see my blog post at learningforward.org/blog/.

Angela M. Ward (angela@2wardequity.com, [@2WardEquity](https://www.instagram.com/2WardEquity)) is founder and CEO of 2Ward Equity.

do the tasks I had planned to do. It's hard to give a Zoom workshop when you're in a hospital bed taking painkillers. Within hours, my colleagues selflessly volunteered to do my work, adding more to their plates to take everything off my plate. They told me, "Don't worry, we've got this. Just get better."

Recognizing the fundamental goodness of other people might be my most important lesson. Throughout my injury, family, friends, coworkers, and complete strangers have put down what they are doing to help me do what I need to do. This was important for me to see.

I've seen so much hatred, division,

and fear in our world that I had begun to wonder whether human compassion no longer existed. But since my crash, I have no doubt that people care deeply for each other. Caring is our default mode. That's a lesson I hope I never forget. ■

COACHES CORNER / Sharron Helmke

Continued from p. 15

- my students?
- What aspects of this change, even small ones, are already emergent in my current teaching? What would the next step into this aspect of the work look like?
- What upcoming learning objectives or standards offer a chance to practice or lean into this work in a way that would benefit learners? Is the coach available to assist in planning this upcoming work, offer classroom support during these early efforts, or reflect on the impact of these changes?
- What are the early indicators

of success for both change in teaching practice and in student outcomes? The more immediate and accessible these indicators are, the more quickly we can either see progress or adjust our approach.

Additionally, coaches can help build teachers' resilience for change by occasionally helping them look backward to reflect on the changes that have already been mastered and become seamlessly incorporated into current practice. In doing so, we remind them that these changes, now part of current practice, were once also new, unfamiliar, and perhaps even felt a bit out of reach. Each time we step toward change, we build resilience and

confidence to tackle the next change, and the next — because we know they will keep coming. It's the nature of the work.

A coach's task is to facilitate growth, not to eliminate the need for it. Those are two very different tasks, and mistaking the nature of the work will undoubtedly lead to coaches experiencing burnout and teachers missing opportunities for improvement.

REFERENCE

Killion, J. & Harrison, C. (2017). *Taking the lead: New roles for teacher and school-based coaches* (2nd ed.). Learning Forward. ■

EQUITY IN FOCUS / Angela M. Ward

Continued from p. 16

the racial incident to think their actions were harmless.

As we reflected and planned to support all students and shift the culture moving forward, black staff members wondered aloud why I was the only person to show up to support them, noting that a contingency from central administration shows up to their campus when a staff member or student dies or commits suicide.

An additional focus of my work districtwide was to implement antiracist professional learning to all staff. I designed professional learning as an entry point to help staff build capacity to address racist issues and issues involving other social identities using actual scenarios that we were dealing with in our schools.

This process eventually led to a shift. The district has revised its crisis response plan to implement a strategic

response to issues arising from race that includes antiracist professional learning as a proactive strategy. Supporting this process was intense and highly stressful.

As an antiracist leader, I knew that self-care is critical to my ability to find meaningful connection and provide supports to my colleagues. I continue to prioritize self-care and encourage other educators to do the same as we lead in stressful times. ■