What is Equity in 2018?

Donna Harris-Aikens, Director of the Education Policy and Practice Department at the National Education Association, discusses this important issue with LFA Executive Director Richard Long. View the conversation at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t-8pggl9Ow&t=111s

Full transcript, lightly edited for clarity

Long: Good morning. My name is Richard Long. I am the executive director of the Learning First Alliance. LFA is a group of 12 locally-oriented education organizations that are dedicated to supporting public education.

Today, we're here to talk with Donna Harris-Aikens, one of our Board members who's also with the National Education Association, about the issue of equity in 2018.

Equity is cited in the Learning First Alliance's ground-breaking compendium, The Elements of Success, [which is about] how 10 million speak to schools that are successful. This issue of equity is something that cuts across the grain of public education in terms of being critically important for all of us as a nation.

Donna comes to us today with unusually unique experiences. She is Director of the Education Policy and Practice Department at NEA. She is also an attorney, graduating from Howard University. She's been involved with many of the issues of day in terms of several rewrites of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act, and she has been deeply involved with Career and Technical Education. Her background includes not only public policy but also how these issues impact kids today, and kids of color most especially.

Donna, just to lead off, what is equity in 2018?

Harris-Aikens: So Rich, I think it is fair to say...actually, first of all, thank you for inviting me to be here with you. But, I think it’s fair to say that most people have their own definition of equity.

When I think about equity, I think about individual students: what do they need? They come to schools, they come to classrooms, as individuals. And obviously they are learning, or we hope they are learning. The most we can do to help them have the opportunity to learn is what I consider to be equity.

So if they come to the school hungry, then we need to address their hunger. If they come to the school needing clothing or a safe place to live, then not only the school community but the community writ large needs to address that need. If they come to school and they are a couple of grade levels behind, then we need to address that in the instruction and make sure that they are getting what they need.

So to me, equity means making sure all kids have the opportunity to not only be in school and to learn but to thrive and excel, which means you’ve got to look at kids individually as well as look at the whole student body.

Long: This is incredibly important because of how it links to our experiences in schools today. What do you think the most important things we should be doing to achieve this personalization, this equity, would be in 2018?
Harris-Aikens: Well, I don’t think there is one silver bullet, because that would make it very easy for all of us.

There are a few things that we need to be thinking about. And one is the instruction in the school. Another is family and community engagement.

The other is making sure that there is a full complement of staff in the school. Making sure that there are the resources in the school. And I’m not just talking about money—I am talking about what that pays for. For example, libraries, since it was School Library Week a couple weeks ago.

Not every school has a library. Not every student has access to a school library. And if there is a library, it’s an open question as to whether that library is open every day. Whether there is a librarian. Whether there are books. Whether there is technology.

So when you think about what I would consider to be a basic in a school, not every student has access to that. Libraries, science classes...

How are students placed in their classes? Are they with people who are just like them, or are they with people who can help them learn differently? And learn not just about the instruction, but learn about different kids of students, so that they leave enriched and learning a lot about their community. And being prepared for life, quite frankly.

So there are a multitude of things that we can be looking at, and we can dig deep on a couple of those. But instruction comes to mind really quickly. A full complement of staff comes to mind really quickly. The leadership of a school comes to mind really quickly, and there is a lot of turnover in some of those leadership positions, which does not help the stability of the school.

And we know that when students are involved, not only do we need to look at the data but we need to look at the school environment itself. Do the students want to be there? Do the educators want to be there? Does the leader want to be there? And does the community actually support the schools? We need all of those things in place if we are going to make sure that students have equity.

Long: I was doing an evaluation of one of the high schools in the District of Columbia. The District of Columbia is an interesting test case, so to speak. This was a physics class, so the kids had access to physics. However, one of the things that they had in their physics lab was a spring against a wall. The teacher, very adroitly, would be able to lift it out and explain and have the kids learn about motion. So they were getting really fine teaching.

Shortly thereafter, I was in a presentation using 3D virtual reality to explore the human brain in another high school. And [the technology used] only cost $2,200. How do we get people to be thinking about not just having a physics lab, but a physics lab with the tools that you need?

Harris-Aikens: Right. Well, actually, let’s go back a couple of steps, because not every high school offers physics. And when you look at schools, high schools in particular, with more students of color, they have even fewer physics classes or high-level math classes, which are considered gateway classes for postsecondary education. So again, it is a...it’s a systemic issue. And it’s not enough to think about what is in the classroom. You also have to think about what classes are actually offered to those students.

But getting back to your question, it does matter what the money pays for. And so, using a spring—there is nothing wrong with that. However, there are other ways to teach certain parts of physics, and certain parts of
other classes quite frankly, and educators should be able to choose which pieces of, or kinds of, resources are available to them to help their students learn. Because not every student learns the same way.

So as we think about the kinds of things that are available, and we've seen the kinds of things that are available in some of our most solid, our best public schools, where all students are thriving, they're excelling, they're moving on to great postsecondary education opportunities and lifelong learning. We know what works. We know what students need. The question is, are we going to actually deliver it to all of our students? Not just some, but all of our students, getting back to the question of equity.

And so I would say it is not a question of what, it's a question of when, or if, even. If we are going to make the decision as a country that we care about all students being prepared for lifelong learning, for postsecondary opportunities. When are we going to resource public schools the way they need to be resourced, and organize public schools the way they need to be organized, and fully staff public schools the way they need to be fully staffed, in order to make sure students have what they need? And that's a big when, and that's a big if.

I think it's all integrally related, and we have as a country and as educators, as community leaders, as parents, as grandparents, whatever role you have in the community...it's a question that should be answered in every community, in every state, and across the country.

Long: One of the things you are talking about in terms of resources is money, as you've mentioned, but it's what the money buys. People make those decisions as to what the money will buy. And we know that there are not enough counselors out there, not enough teachers, especially in rural communities and in urban environments where poverty tends to be deeper. And we need actually to think about resources as, in addition to basic, how to overcome the effects of poverty.

What are the arguments that we should be thinking about in order to bring out these Elements of Success? All of these groups are talking about all of these issues as being equally critical, but mixed in a slightly different way in each building.

What would be your advice to parents out there, and to business leaders, looking to help to make their schools as productive as they could be?

Harris-Aikens: So first I would say, take a deep breath. Take a step back. And actually take a look at your community and at your school. There is data that is widely available. Not everyone knows about it. But the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education actually today just released some data around what schools have and what they don't have.

And so as we think about, as community leaders or as parents, wanting to help our schools, one of the things you can do is take a look at the data before you go to have your meeting with the principal or the school counselor or whoever you plan to meet with, or the teachers in the school.

If you go in to talk to the school staff, whoever it is, whether it's a teacher, whether it's the education support professional, whether it's the school counselor, school nurse, the principal, the assistant principal—whoever it is, generally speaking, they have an idea of what they need in that school. They generally have an idea of what the strengths are in that school, what the assets are and what they need and what the gaps are. And it may not be the mix of things that you thought when you walked in the door. So we all need to be open to understanding that your lens or your understanding of what's happening within that school may differ slightly with reality.
And on the other end of things, as those conversations are happening, there may be things that parents are concerned about that the school staff may not be aware of, or may not be aware is so critically important to parents as they think about what their kids should be doing when they graduate from high school.

So as all of us come together...in the ideal world, all of us would come together, have those conversations at the local level, at the school level, and figure out in that school, what is there, what's needed, what are the gaps, and try and address those opportunity gaps and access gaps once and for all.

As we think about, as a country, how we plan to move forward, and the kind of economic strength, economic stability, that we need to move forward, we need every student to be prepared. That does not mean every student will be in the same job or the same career. They need to be prepared to make the choice of what career is going to work for them, what career they find their way into. They need to be aware of career pathways, which is how career technical education can provide a very strong foundation for every student as they navigate careers. And as they navigate, quite frankly, some of their choices that might effect which college they go to, if they go to college, whether it's an apprenticeship, whether it's a community college. All of those are valid and viable and helpful to our economy. And every student should be aware of all of those options.

So as we think about, and as students think about, what they want to do as they're moving forward, it's critically important for everyone, I think, to take a step back and just take a moment and think, "I know I have my lens, but when I go to talk to other people who have their own beliefs and their own concerns..."

I think if you keep students at the center of that conversation, you will always find a solution that works for the entire community and for the entire school. And it's sometimes difficult to keep students in the center of that conversation as you think about your business interest, or your interest as a parent, or your interest as an educator, to get your point across. But circling back around to that central theme or idea or goal, that students need to be interested in their learning, students need to be prepared to move on past graduation, students need to be lifelong learners.

This country, this global economy, is different than it ever has been before. Everyone who is graduating either high school or college today needs to be a lifelong learner, and therefore our school system, our public school system, needs to be organized so that they are graduating as lifelong learners.

**Long:** Donna, thank you. This has been really enlightening.

I think in summary, what I'm taking away from this, is that this is within us to solve. We can address these issues.

As *The Elements of Success* points out, we have a pretty good idea how to change, how to develop, because this is being done in schools now. Teachers are doing this, administrators are doing this, parents are engaged, and this is a matter of not just political courage but political will, and it's a matter of thinking a little bit differently and challenging ourselves to be what we know we can be.

Thank you.