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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Now What? Confronting Uncomfortable Truths About Inequity in Schools*.

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FOREWORD

Three Voices. One Message.

A decade ago, three Latina superintendents who served urban school districts in California published their first book, *A Culturally Proficient Society Begins in School: Leadership for Equity*. In those ten years, these three superintendents continued honing their craft by continuing their “hands-on work” in school districts that have been historically overlooked. Drs. Franco, Ott, and Robles continue their “hands-on” work in our schools and, just as important, make their presence known in state and national professional leadership organizations. As you will see when reading this important work, the authors hold as deep beliefs that all students have the capacity to learn and achieve at high levels and that our schools have the capacity to educate all children and youth to high levels. We are honored to have had the distinct pleasure to know and work with these remarkable leaders for more than twenty years.

Franco, Ott, and Robles characterized their first book as timely and relevant as they shared their experiences in moving schools and school districts to address individual and systemic inequities that fostered low engagement with communities and unacceptably low achievement of students. They are consistent in identifying leadership actions necessary to overcome barriers to student achievement and parent engagement.

Today, the authors frame the message in this book as urgent. They note that too many students and communities were left behind during the pandemic, which created an immediate shift to learning in virtual formats. *Now What? Confronting Uncomfortable Truths About Inequity in Schools* is a call to action. Using the Culturally Proficient Framework, the authors present case stories as successful models for implementation. The authors expertly provide a step-by-step template for leaders to use in designing and implementing actions intended to narrow access and achievement gaps for historically marginalized students in schools.

This book is written by leaders for leaders who are ready to act no matter how uncomfortable their current reality might be. The risks of inaction for our students are much too high to seek comfort in today's complex educational environment. The desired state for educational leaders must engage community, political, religious, law enforcement, mental health, and educational leaders in shared decision-making to overcome barriers for equitable schools, in both virtual and face-to-face experiences. No longer can we wait for the next crisis or the next best practice or the next expert to face our uncomfortable truths about inequities in schools. The field of education has experienced equity mandates and manipulations for well over fifty years. The time is now. Let's join these authors on this well-charted journey toward success for all learners.

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CHAPTER 1

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INTRODUCTION

“The goal is not to be better than the other man, but better than your previous self.”

Dalai Lama XIV

Our first book was written to share our experiences as three Latina superintendents who led urban school districts and navigated the ladder to success during the lingering misogyny and racism of the twenty-first century. It was intended to motivate others to do the crucial work of moving organizations to address inequalities, attitudes, and behaviors that perpetuate inequalities. The book supported leaders in moving their systems forward by developing an awareness of the need for change and a commitment to Cultural Proficiency. The book was timely and relevant.

A lot has stayed the same, and so much has changed since 2011. At the ten-year anniversary of the book *A Culturally Proficient Society Begins in School: Leadership for Equity*, a second book is **urgent**. The national divide over important social, economic, and political issues has never been greater, and the threats to our democracy and Constitution have never been more real. Fractured government, threats to voter freedom, social upheaval, an ongoing and mutating pandemic, conspiracy theories, and lies and half-truths from government leaders—all fueled by ever-present partisan media sources, including unchecked social media—have brought this nation to important crossroads of crisis. No institution has been more affected than public education. As a microcosm of society, public education as we know it and its near-total collapse during the pandemic has hit families and communities hard. Schools and the public they serve had to rethink the entire teaching/learning enterprise, including the delivery of many public services to families.

The glaring inequity in schools pre-pandemic has been made worse, as too many students and families were further left behind by inadequate resources for online learning and a lack of other resources and support services that students and families most in need count on for their well-being and survival. While most students suffered educational lags during the pandemic, some students were affected more than others. As a result, some students have fallen woefully behind academically, have dropped out, are lacking credits to graduate or transfer to college, or have simply fallen off our radar screens. Even if schooling were to get back to pre-pandemic standards, too many students lost too much for too long for even the most compassionate and capable of us to help them catch up. We should not be surprised that the most vulnerable students during this time represent members of the same student demographic groups that have been, and who continue to be, the most underserved in our society. These are largely students of color, English learners, economically disadvantaged students, migrant students, and students with special needs. The access, opportunity, and achievement gaps most significant for these groups have grown deeper and will continue to widen unless compassionate and committed individuals conduct some form of concerted and calculated triage to prioritize treatment and intervention. The times call for educational and other public leaders to confront this challenge, take risks, and do whatever it takes to arrest the loss of progress for too many students who matter. As a microcosm of society, schools can lead the way to teach other social institutions how to arrest and reverse the injustices made worse by current events. This is a time for an urgent response. We intend for this book to be a call to action for educational, religious, civic, and private advocates at the local and national levels to engage in, commit to, and address the urgent challenges ahead of us.

A book can be seen as simply one's point of view . . . as ideas on a page. We intend for this book to be a clarion call to move beyond words and bold conversations to action, and we invite our readers to join us on the journey. In addition to presenting a call to action, another important purpose of this book is to provide educational leaders with a lens, a framework, and a set of tools to assess and address educational inequities in communities today. We acknowledge the many leaders who already are on board and skilled for this work, but we also recognize that the work is hard and that even the loudest, most capable advocates need new conversations, fresh ideas and approaches, and renewed motivation to bolster their work. The final purpose of this book is to create an ongoing community of bold thinkers and activists to share and support each other in this work. We do not know all there is to know; however, we have learned many things on our journeys. We know things now that we did not know ten years ago, and we look forward to sharing those lessons with you. We will enhance the tools we share with our readers with lived lessons and perspectives from our work in the field and personal case stories. We invite you to apply your own knowledge and analyses to further inform and contribute to the collective knowledge we all

need to sustain this work. This is work that calls for all of us to come together to share ideas and best practices to support each other through difficult times. We welcome you on board!

We introduced readers to the Culturally Proficient Framework and tools in our first book. The framework is an organizer for understanding how to use four specific tools of Cultural Proficiency to begin and guide your work for creating and sustaining equity-based practices in your organizations. Chapter 2 will review the framework and tools in an updated context.

Furthermore, readers may recall that this work begins and is sustained with a mind shift that reflects how people think, talk, and act in an emerging equity culture. One of the guiding principles of Cultural Proficiency states, “People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.” This principle is important for us to understand as educators because it explains the beginnings of the access, achievement, and opportunity gaps that plague underserved communities across this nation. Narrowing and closing these gaps is the ultimate goal of Cultural Proficiency.

- The above guiding principle of Cultural Proficiency provides the moral imperative for conducting this work at both the personal and organizational levels.
- The Cultural Proficiency Continuum and, specifically in this book, the Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric that we present and discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 give us a common language to discuss difficult, often controversial, topics in a non-contentious manner and provide examples of ineffective and effective practices to guide our transformation for inclusion and equity. This in turn stimulates conversation and provides a place for individuals of all backgrounds, racial groups, ethnicities, and identities to examine their personal and organizational positions on the continuum, assess the current status quo, and identify next steps to make progress toward Cultural Proficiency and closing educational gaps.
- Another tool, the five essential elements of Cultural Proficiency, provides behavioral standards to guide culturally competent leaders as they address current societal and organizational challenges. The five essential elements of Cultural Proficiency are as follows:
 - Assessing culture (one’s own and others)
 - Valuing diversity
 - Managing the dynamics of difference
 - Adapting to diversity
 - Institutionalizing cultural knowledge

All the tools within the Culturally Proficient Framework, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, provide leaders with a toolkit for examining, discussing, and making changes to policies and practices to better meet the needs of communities during this historic time when there is a national effort to focus on issues of equity and inclusion. In addition, our lived experiences, as expressed in this book, can be used in training and staff development sessions to engage in constructive conversations about difficult and sensitive topics and to examine the particular applications of Cultural Proficiency as revealed in our case stories and the Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric in Chapter 4.

We begin by reintroducing ourselves and updating what has transpired in our professional lives in the past decade.

Carmella S. Franco completed her tenure as a state trustee of a takeover school district in Monterey County. Franco's work with governance has included districts with a majority of lower-socioeconomic, underserved students. She is recognized for assisting districts that are experiencing difficult situations. Professional presentations with co-authors Ott and Robles and others have centered on advancing the numbers of women of color in leadership positions throughout the country. She serves as a superintendents' coach and adviser and a mentor to aspiring superintendents of color for a number of organizations, including the AASA-USC Rossier Urban Superintendents Academy.

Maria G. Ott joined the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education as a faculty member upon retirement from the superintendency and currently holds the Irving R. and Virginia A. Melbo Chair in Education Administration. Her transition to higher education was an opportunity to prepare leaders for school systems, higher education, and organizations serving society in the nonprofit and for-profit environments. Ott designed and launched the AASA-USC Rossier Urban Superintendents Academy in 2015 to prepare diverse and equity-minded leaders for K–12 system leadership. She is recognized for her leadership and advocacy for bilingual education, leadership development for women, and public-private partnerships in education, and serves as a board member for the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS).

Darline P. Robles was a superintendent for twenty years. With her last appointment, she served as superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, the largest educational service region in the country. She left the superintendency to join the faculty at the Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, to create a new master's in education

focused on K–12 leadership and preparation for the administrator’s credential. She also serves as the associate dean for Equity and Community Engagement, where she provides support and training to faculty and staff on issues of access, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, she is the diversity liaison to the university and is a member of the university’s Cultural Journey Network. She continues to teach in the K–12 and higher education doctoral program focused on preparing school leaders to become strategic leaders with an equity mindset.

We are not the same leaders/authors of our first book. As you will read, what we know now that we didn’t know then has fortified our approach and emboldened our message. We hope that our experiences and lessons will unfold in such a way to not only guide your progress but accelerate it as we share with you things we wish we knew when we began this journey ten years ago. The rest of this book provides further insight into the following ten lessons that we share with our readers.

1. The status quo and the false belief in a meritocracy work against inclusivity in all sectors of society, not just education.
2. Equity issues are civil rights issues; it is your duty as a public servant to confront them and help make lasting change.
3. Develop an anti-racist stance. Anti-racism is not the same thing as not being racist. Confront all forms of oppression, not just those that you know or care about the most. Create understanding about the generational trauma, bigotry, and oppression of all oppressed groups, including LGBTQ and gender-fluid populations.
4. Step out of your comfort zone. Confront racism and oppression and other brutal facts directly. Do not obfuscate issues with rhetoric or politically correct language. Support claims with data, not predominance of opinion. Advocacy is required of all equity leaders. Often activism is needed. Expect pushback and criticism. Do not try to avoid it; manage it. Accept the consequences of bold action, but seek support from key constituents ahead of time and during your equity campaign.
5. Assume everyone’s best intentions, but make sure committees and decision-making groups share appropriate representation from the communities you serve to ensure that groups’ issues are not misrepresented, silenced, or ignored.

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6. Examine your own cultural identity(s), i.e., cultural membership and status, as an ongoing process. Who are your allies, and whom do you unintentionally oppress with your ignorance, words, thoughts, or actions? Take responsibility for challenging your own shortcomings and biases. Consider the extent to which you, yourself, are an obstacle to change.
7. Expect fatigue and battle scars. Address your emotional needs and the emotional needs of friends and colleagues who help you do this work. Have mentors and allies to guide and support you. Take informed risks. Do not be afraid to make and admit mistakes.
8. Develop the next generation of leaders. By developing leadership in others, you demonstrate effective executive leadership yourself, and you establish the groundwork for institutionalizing change across the organization.
9. Understand that becoming culturally proficient is not just something you do at work. It is a lifelong personal experience for evolving your humanity on this planet. Embrace the process. Just because you will never finish the work does not mean you are excused from starting it.
10. Becoming culturally proficient is an inside-out approach. It is not something the leader does *to* others, nor is it something they delegate. The executive leader holds and communicates the vision for the work, directs the work, understands the work, participates in the work, and is ultimately responsible for the outcomes.

