

# ***Closing All the Gaps***

## **And How That Phrase is Problematic**

Circe Stumbo, President, and  
David Davidson, Project Director for  
Racial Equity

West Wind Education Policy Inc.

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*West Wind*  
EDUCATION POLICY

# Who is West Wind Education Policy Inc.

- Small company organized to help state leaders imagine and enact a system of education that overcomes historic inequities and engages all students in learning
- Based in Iowa City, IA



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# Theoretical Framework

- Ours is primarily a political analysis
  - Power
  - Authority
  - Policy
- We use our framework for Systemic Equity Leadership, which includes Critical Race Theory

# Our Work

- Policy Analysis
- Knowledge Building
- Systemic Equity Leadership Development
- ... through the lens of race

# West Wind's Systemic Equity Leadership

- Systems are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting
- Each of us perpetuates systemic inequities in education
- Leadership is a subversive act to disrupt and transform systems

# West Wind's Systemic Equity Leadership

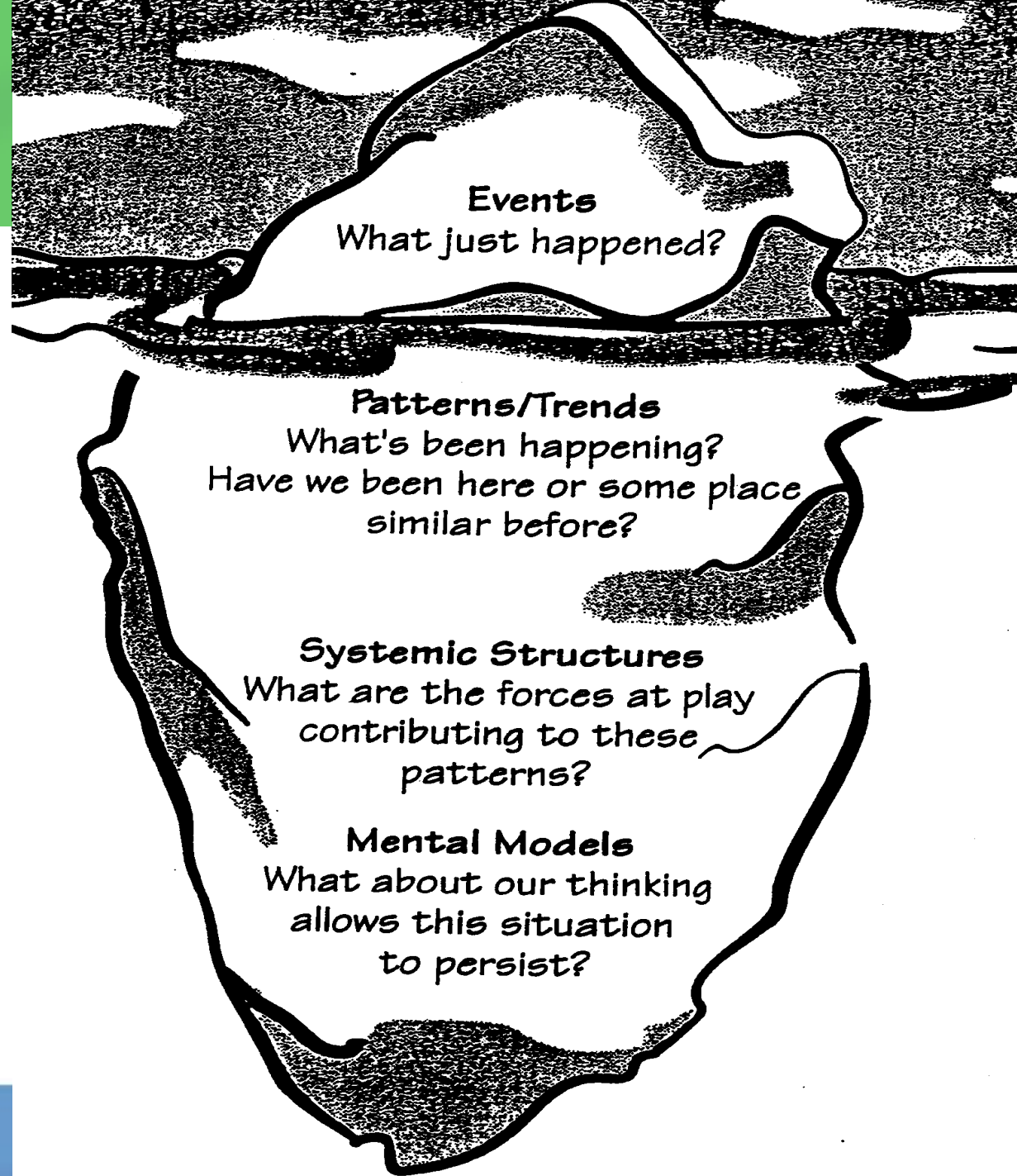
- The equity agenda in our system of K-12 public education is urgent and progress is not linear
- Inequities in our system of K-12 public education are intricately tied to issues of power

# West Wind's Systemic Equity Leadership

- Builds on
  - Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate)
  - Learning organizations (Senge)
  - Systems thinking (Wheatly)
  - Adaptive leadership (Heifetz)
  - Direct Action Organizing (Midwest Academy)
  - Our professional wisdom and lived experience

# The Iceberg

Peter Senge, et al, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook Project, Schools That Learn*



# Mental Models (Senge, et al)

- The core competency that allows us to reflect on, clarify, and improve our internal pictures of the world, and to see how they shape our actions.
- **We ask, what about our thinking allows the situation to persist?**

# Questions We Ask

- What is the impact of holding negative stereotypes that children of color are dangerous and intellectually inferior on children in school?
  - ... on teachers' beliefs?
  - ... on administrators' decisions?
- If children of color are inferior and dangerous, how should we treat them in schools?

# Questions We Ask

- What about our own policies and practices reveal and reinforce negative stereotypes about students of color?
- What about the way policies and practices are implemented reveal and reinforce negative stereotypes?

# Stop Using “Achievement Gaps”

- Does the achievement gap discourse disrupt these patterns and dominant mental models?
- We suggest that it does not

# Stop Using “Achievement Gaps”

- Indeed, not only does it reinforce the notion that students of color are intellectually inferior to white students...
- ... it neither tells a different story, nor tells a story that instills passion, moral outrage, or commitment to overcoming racial disparities

# Focus On Race

- Educators and education policymakers all **MUST** address race
- Yet, this is not the norm.... When we talk about solving racial achievement gaps in reading, we tend to talk about reading or remediation.
- We needed a framework for investigating race.

# Change Our Focus

- So, how can we talk **more about race** and **about more than just “achievement”**?
- How can we alter our practice so we don't reinforce attitudes about deficits among students of color?

# *Possible Solutions*

- **More holistically capture the student experience**
  - Talk to our children
  - Look at micro-aggressions
  - Examine their experiences and our mental models

# *Possible Solutions*

- **Broaden the frame?**
  - Shifting from talking about “achievement gaps” to “racial disparities”

# *Possible Solutions*

- **Augment the Data?** Collect more information than just performance on standardized exams
  - School climate surveys
  - Ethnographic research (student experiences, teacher beliefs, forces at play)

# *Possible Solution*

- **Ask different questions** of the data?
  - When reporting data that reveal racial disparities, ask what work the recipient of the data is engaged in around race.

# *Possible Solutions*

- **Support conversations about race?**
  - Support professional development, facilitate conversations, study race, engage in different research

# *Possible Solutions*

- Examine the student experience?
- Changing our terms?
- Augment the data?
- Ask different questions?
- Support conversations about race?
- Your ideas?
- Pros/Cons of each?

# Closing Thought

- We encourage everyone to eliminate the term “achievement gap” from our equity work, research, and activism.
- At least replace with “racial disparities”

# *Contact Info*

## **Circe Stumbo and David Davidson**

West Wind Education Policy Inc.

1700 S. First Ave, Suite 17  
Iowa City, IA 52240

[circe@westwinded.com](mailto:circe@westwinded.com)

[david@westwinded.com](mailto:david@westwinded.com)

877-354-9378 (toll free)

[www.westwinded.com](http://www.westwinded.com)

