

## Inquiry Now: Equity-Focused Instructional Leadership

How Leaders Can Leverage Inquiry-Based Instruction to Advance Equity and Student Learning



The 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA)’s *Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership* professional learning program, offered through a partnership with the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP), centers instructional leadership as a means to advance equity-minded reforms in the classroom and across schools. The program is designed to support leaders in realizing the potential of inquiry-based instruction to position all students as the drivers of their own learning, leveraging their interest and experience, in order to facilitate learning. Through participating in such learning, students can see themselves as capable of engaging in classroom, school, and community concerns. A recent [study](#) of California principals found strong evidence that leaders’ “overall access to professional development—as well as specific learning about instructional leadership—is strongly associated

with student achievement gains in both mathematics and English language arts.” Notably, “Underrepresented students of color benefit the most from their principals’ opportunities to learn” (Campoli, Darling-Hammond, Podolsky, Levin, 2022). The 21CSLA *Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership* program supports system and school leaders in understanding what quality inquiry-based instruction looks like, how to support it, and how to leverage inquiry to improve learning for all students.

### **Inquiry Fosters Equity**

In order to advance equity in schools, the 21CSLA *Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership* series supports leaders to work with teachers to assess which students are learning, which students are not, and how a change in methods might impact student learning. This methodology operationalizes the 21CSLA Equity Statement, which describes a leader for equity as someone who seeks to, “...transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.” To develop and sustain a more equitable educational system – one that supports students who have been historically underserved, inquiry is both necessary and appropriate. The process of inquiry, especially when it is embraced collectively, offers the tools necessary to transform a goal of social justice into a sustainable method of advancing equity. The series is designed to help leaders facilitate and support the teacher dispositional shift that will allow for more student choice and voice. Ultimately, the series seeks to support leaders in effectively facilitating and collaborating with teachers to build and implement a vision for equity-focused inquiry-based instruction across the disciplines.

### **Inquiry Develops Life-Long Critical Thinkers**

Inquiry-based instruction builds students’ capacity to analyze and evaluate the arguments of others, a skill that has become increasingly important for students to be civically engaged participants in their communities. To be able to discern lies or disinformation has always been a valuable skill, but it seems even more so in the age of instant access to news and social media. How can we be sure what we read, see, and hear is accurate? How do we know if the information we receive about politics, health, the environment, the economy, or culture is true, let alone biased? How do we seek reliable, accurate, and unbiased information? Open-ended questions like

these illustrate the importance of inquiry in building students' media literacy and critical thinking skills. This approach also supports our individual and collective capacity to discern the credibility of a claim through the analysis of relevant evidence, something that has both global and local implications for how we understand our world.

When students are given the opportunity to engage in the inquiry process, they can focus on matters intrinsic to their own communities, cultures, and lived experiences, matters that are often embedded in multiple disciplines all at once. Consider the effectiveness of the inquiry process in the case of an environmental injustice investigation. Concerned community members notice poor health outcomes and go about investigating whether unhealthy environmental conditions could be the cause. They ask questions, collect data and evidence, make sense of this information, and then raise concerns and voice demands of those in a position to change circumstances. Formal researchers follow up on these concerns to study the impact of such things as industrial pollution, auto emissions and hazardous waste. One such [study](#) from Harvard confirmed what concerned community members had long noted - that their neighborhood is disproportionately burdened by pollution. Indeed, that university study revealed that African Americans are exposed to 14% more PM 2.5 (pollution that causes heart and lung diseases) than white Americans; exposure tends to be much higher in neighborhoods that are at least 85% Black; and African Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to die from this pollution. The inquiry process sits at the heart of social change, and school leaders can support equity-minded reforms by engaging their students in learning that empowers them to ask questions and explore issues that matter to their lives now and in the future. Inquiry-based instruction can develop and sustain lifelong learners, and successful implementation requires the support and engagement of leaders.

### **New Knowledge Supports Social-Emotional Wellbeing.**

Today, especially, school leaders must attend to the whole child. There is a well-documented and inextricable relationship between children's ability to learn and their social-emotional wellbeing. Cognition and emotion are interrelated. Students who experienced the greatest trauma during the pandemic, for instance, are least prepared to learn in the way that they did before 2020. Losing loved ones, suffering dislocations and isolation, experiencing housing and food insecurity, and facing illness themselves, students have social-emotional needs that will take years to begin to address. Students facing other forms of trauma, including generational and historic, have long deserved this care. As a starting point, inquiry-based instruction can serve as an approach to engage these students, especially if the classroom investigations are centered on issues that are relevant and meaningful to the students and their communities. Through this inquiry-based approach to instruction that centers equity, students can develop their own internal capacities to grow and succeed in the face of adversity. Leaders set the tone for this instruction, and are critical to its sustained success.

**About *Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership***

The *Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership* professional learning program is a 12-hour workshop series composed of distinct modules, each based on a different stage of the inquiry cycle. The series is hosted by a diverse and experienced team of educators from both the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP) and the 21CSLA State Center. Through an interactive and engaging instructional leadership workshop model, leaders consider how to help teachers assess student learning and facilitate and support the teacher dispositional shift that will allow for more student choice and voice. Offered in partnership with local 21CSLA Regional Academies, the series seeks to support leaders in effectively facilitating and collaborating with teachers to build vision for equity-focused inquiry-based instruction across the disciplines.



To Learn More about Inquiry Now:



To learn more about the *Inquiry Now* series, visit:

<https://chssp.ucdavis.edu/21csla/inquiry>