

DIVERSITY CORNER

“Belonging at the Center”: A Conversation with Ty M. Harris

By Pierre LaRocco, Diversity At-Large Representative, PA Principals Association
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In this month’s *Diversity Corner*, I had the privilege of speaking with **Ty M. Harris, Director of Opportunity and Achievement for Virginia Beach City Public Schools**, a leader whose work sits at the intersection of equity, systems change and human connection. Our conversation explored what it truly means to create schools where every student not only has access but is empowered to achieve. From reimagining how we define opportunity, to confronting the barriers that persist in our systems, Ty offers both challenge and hope for school leaders across the commonwealth. His insights remind us that equity isn’t a program—it’s a practice grounded in purpose, courage and collective responsibility.

Editor’s note: *This transcript has been edited for clarity and length while preserving the speaker’s intent and voice.*

Pierre LaRocco: Ty, you’ve said our lived and learned experiences shape who we are. How does that inform your approach to equity?

Ty M. Harris: It’s universal—everyone’s experience shapes their beliefs. I’ve taught in Northern Virginia, worked at the U.S. Department of Education, and visited districts from Chicago, LA, and New York to rural Montana and Kentucky. One truth holds: exposure matters. If someone’s experience is limited, we can’t be shocked when they struggle to generate ideas for shared problems. But big districts don’t have all the answers either. The work requires reflection, honest use of data, and courageous conversations about what comes next.

From a diversity lens, I’m “on fire” about this because I hated high school. I was one of the few students of color at a rural Virginia school, with no teachers or classmates who looked like me. Sports kept me grounded, but I often felt unseen. During my practicum in college, I saw students living the same isolation I had felt. That’s when I committed to outcomes for all students, especially those marginalized.

We made real progress in Virginia Beach. As DEI director, I led an equity plan that our conservative-leaning board passed unanimously—a big deal. Then policy shifts paused that work. Remove the structures that build cultural competence, and you get

predictable results: widening gaps. A new administration will eventually look at the data and ask, “What happened?” We’ll know the answer—we paused what worked. My focus now is belonging. It’s the third rung on Maslow’s hierarchy, right after safety, and it touches everything. Even in “red” districts where language is constrained, we can still do the human work: listen to teachers, families, and—most importantly—students. They’ve watched progress get rolled back, and they have opinions. If we include them now, we’ll have a jump-off point when the pendulum swings back.

Pierre: Systemic change brings resistance and fatigue. How do you navigate both?

Ty: Find your tribe. Public education can feel lonely, and our profession often isn’t elevated the way it should be. We come with different motivations—mentoring, content expertise, service—and it’s easy to feel isolated. I built a professional learning community through William & Mary’s School and University Research Network (SURN) and still lean on colleagues—sometimes across the state—more than folks next door. What bonds us isn’t demographics as much as shared outsider experiences: being new to a region or system, learning the history without being confined by it.

You need spaces where you can be vulnerable and honest. Not every environment is safe for that. If teachers don’t feel psychological safety, they’ll stay quiet in formal settings and air concerns elsewhere. Belonging—again—is central. Creating that for adults keeps us in the work.

Pierre: Trust and shared ownership with teachers, families and the wider community—how do you build it?

Ty: Leverage resources and relationships; don’t assume you have all the answers. Conferences can help—pick sessions that stretch you, not ones you could present yourself. If travel isn’t possible, map partners inside your system. My office has three people, yet we reach thousands because we collaborate—Family & Community Engagement, Planning, Innovation and Accountability (data/surveys) and Teaching & Learning—often not just the executive lead but the right doer in the room.

We’re a transient, military-heavy community, and historically we underinvested in family partnership—easy to rationalize when families come and go. We’re changing that. Our belonging framework emphasizes adults and families, not just students. Teacher belonging ties directly to retention. And we codified this work, embedding it in our five-year strategic framework and annual strategic action agenda. When it’s written into goals and metrics, accountability follows. Much of the pushback on “equity” stems from

confusing equity with equality—people assume we’re taking from one child to give to another. Codifying purpose helps keep the focus on outcomes for all.

Pierre: At Springfield, we survey the sense of belonging for students twice a year and annually for staff and families. Our student favorable rate is 93%, which we celebrate, but I worry about the 7% who don’t feel it. How do we find them?

Ty: Classroom engagement doesn’t equal belonging; students can mask disconnection while doing the work. Anonymous surveys make identification tricky, so systems and opportunities matter: clubs, sports, representation in curriculum and staffing and adult relationships. The question I’d pose to staff is, could you name who might be in that 7%—and why? Not to label, but to sharpen support.

Ty (to Pierre): From the AP lens, are you facing challenges retaining educators of color?

Pierre: We don’t have as many as we’d like, but we’ve retained those we have.

Ty: Retention and leadership pipelines are a concern nationally. Studies show minority administrators often have shorter tenures. In some places, we can’t even formally explore that right now due to policy priorities. Do you feel Pennsylvania has a teacher-to-admin pipeline—especially for educators of color—given restrictions on targeted programs?

Pierre: Honestly, our pipeline is thin. Out of 71 teachers, only one is currently in an admin prep program. Even with reduced-rate “aspiring principal” memberships, participation is low. Many educators just don’t want the job—they see what administrators endure.

Ty: Yet we’ll still need leaders. When pipelines are weak, we end up with the wrong people in the wrong seats, or with folks stepping in because no one else will. Systems pay the price.

Pierre: What advice helps leaders move from equity talk to equity action?

Ty: Start with what officially drives your work—a mission/vision or a strategic framework. Then ask your stakeholders—disaggregated by subgroup—if they experience those commitments as true. If any subgroup can’t honestly say “yes,” conduct a needs assessment and a real segmentation analysis: Who’s Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed? (Think RACI). Many districts “do this every year,” but not at the depth where misalignments surface. Clarity on roles and accountability prevents the Spider-Man pointing meme—everyone thinking it’s someone else’s job.

Pierre: You can find a hundred books on going from “bad to good,” but few on “good to great.”

Ty: Exactly—hence the frustration with past accountability models. High performers struggled to show “enough” growth. But the point stands: the closer you are to good, the easier it is to miss the subtle drops—especially for subgroups.

Pierre: Give every principal in Pennsylvania one concrete challenge for tomorrow.

Ty: Personalize it. Ask yourself, child by child across four groups (students with disabilities, English learners, students living in poverty and marginalized identities broadly defined: race, faith, gender identity, etc.), “If this were my child, are we meeting their needs?” Don’t weaponize the exercise; use it to open honest dialogue. Early in my career, I came in hot—facts in hand, Malcolm-X-style—and I learned that tone can shut doors. Leave room for growth. Invite people into the work instead of pushing them out of it.

Pierre: How do you see the future of educational equity, and what gives you hope?

Ty: In the short term, I expect a continued decline in cultural competency—some programs and courses have been limited or cut, even in blue states. Teacher prep constraints mean many new educators won’t be as prepared as they could be to serve diverse learners—and the data will reflect that. When performance drops for groups that previously fared well, alarms will ring, and we’ll see a renewal of equity-grounded practices—Hammond, Cobb, Cournapple and others—because the outcomes will demand it. My hope is that districts that align efforts to an adopted framework, keep honest conversations alive and work to the furthest line allowed by local policy will be ready with a foundation—especially around belonging—when the pendulum swings back.

Pierre: Ty, thank you.

Ty: You’re welcome. I appreciate the conversation.

As our conversation came to a close, I was reminded that the real work of equity happens not in grand initiatives, but in the daily decisions we make as leaders—how we listen, how we allocate resources and how we create belonging for every student. Ty’s words serve as both an encouragement and a challenge: to move from good intentions

to intentional action. In every classroom and conversation, we have the power to open doors of opportunity that change the trajectory of a student's life. *May we continue this work with humility, courage and the unwavering belief that equity and excellence are not competing goals; they are inseparable truths.*