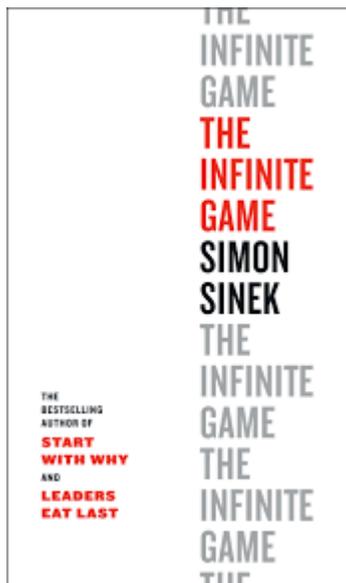


Our North Star is our Just Cause

We are grounded in our *Why*; we know that [#togetherisbetter](#) is sustenance for our excellence; the path ahead of us is oriented towards our *North Star*. Taking time in the middle of the year to reflect on the journey to-date is vital. While there hasn't been much actual snow to speak of, there are so many moving pieces in the comings and goings of a school year, that without reflection, we run the risk of losing sight of our North Star in the squall. In service of ambition to stay the course, we continue to draw



inspiration from Simon Sinek. His latest book, *The Infinite Game*, feels as though it was written for leaders in the middle of a journey. Simply put, it begs the question, "How do you win a game that has no end?"

Applied to our world, the calendar of a school year—with its deadlines and windows for assessment—is finite. Even this letter, as a "mid-year" check-in, reinforces how time-bound our thinking about our work can be. While the experience of a single school year is the path in front of us. Our shared journey through this district's work is as that of lifelong learners tasked with developing a generation of talent. The act of being an educator is to be a player in an Infinite Game. As such, the truest manifestation of our *Why* is to learn how to navigate the specific needs of the finite moment while not compromising what we believe about how students learn best. The journey towards having an infinite mindset asks five things of us, which we'll explore in this letter through a sharing of the successes and learnings we've had since September.

Advance a Just Cause

According to Sinek, to know if a cause is Just, it must meet satisfy five criteria. It must be **for something**—we must be able to phrase it as affirmative and optimistic. It must be **inclusive**—open to all who would like to contribute. It must be **service oriented**—for the benefit of others. It must be **resilient**—able to endure political, technological, and cultural change. Lastly, it must be **idealistic**—BIG, BOLD, and ultimately, unachievable. Against the backdrop of these statements, our charge to Advance Equity Now—our *Why*—can be confirmed as a Just Cause.

As part of our continued learning, we have resumed our partnership with NYU MetroCenter to be sure that we have the right language to frame our work so that it is both (easily) accessible and (appropriately) ambitious. If we are going to be warriors for equity, we need to have a shared understanding of what we are trying to accomplish. At the core of our work in this area with all stakeholders is the question, "how can I disrupt and dismantle the existence of inequity within my sphere of influence?" In addition to our ongoing work with school leaders and last year's teacher's cohort, we have expanded our work to include a second cohort of teachers, a working group of middle school educators (with a focus group of students!), and before the end of the year, we will be bringing this work to our parent coordinators and guidance counselors. While the path through this work is, at times, murky, the cost of *not* talking about these topics is too great to ignore.

NYU STEINHARDT Center for Strategic Solutions
Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools

Educational equity

Educational equity means each student has what they need to:

- 1) define & experience their own success,
- 2) experience joy in learning everyday, and
- 3) see themselves reflected in the content of their learning as well as the educators who serve them.

It provides a climate in school that attends to race, ethnicity, language, culture, gender identity & expression, sexual orientation, religion, (dis)ability, and socioeconomic status (McCabe Zwerger, 2017).

Build Trusting Teams



Queens North Exec Supt.
@MabelSarduy

Superintendent Giunta from D. 26 Creating Opportunities for all Principals to see their Leadership Practices using their Instructional Leadership Team and supported by the BCO - Building Instruction Leadership Coaches! #Champions for Children @DOEChancellor @CWATSONHARRIS @D26Team



12:54 PM · Dec 3, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

When we work on a Trusting Team we feel safe to express vulnerability. We feel safe to raise our hands and admit we made a mistake, be honest about shortfalls in performance, take responsibility for our behavior and ask for help. Asking for help is an act that reveals vulnerability. However, when on a Trusting Team, we do so with the confidence that our boss or our colleagues will be there to support us.

-The Infinite Game, p. 106

The biggest mistake we could make in our work might be having the arrogance that we can handle anything of importance entirely on our own. (Indeed, such a mindset would never have produced #togetherisbetter.) A reorganization of our partnership with the Queens North Borough Community Office has, in essence, more than doubled the number of district-level leaders who work tirelessly in service of our schools. Thanks to the continued support of, and partnership with, Executive Superintendent

Mabel Muñiz-Sarduy, our team has truly become the *Queens North Star* that serves as the beacon for our schools to navigate the demands of the school year.

Our team is successful because we trust each other. We are aligned in our Just Cause; when uncertainty arises we are not afraid to reach out to our teammates so that we can maintain our high level of service to our schools. At the center of our support of schools—whether it be in large group (Principal & AP Conferences, district-level meetings) or in smaller (on-site) support visits this year has been governed by the modeling of vulnerability so that those we support see us as true partners in the work. It is our steadfast belief that this is the surest way to maintain the lifeblood and connective tissue of our work: Trust.

Study Worthy Rivals

Indeed, to most of us, it is so ingrained in the way we think that we automatically adopt an “us” against “them” attitude whenever there are other players in the field, regardless of the nature of the game. If we are a player in an infinite game, however, we have to stop thinking of other players as competitors to be beaten and start thinking of them as Worthy Rivals who can help us become better players.

-The Infinite Game, p. 161

District 26 schools are united by a shared commitment to excellence; at the same time, there are 27 ([soon to be 28](#)) different journeys towards Equity and Excellence for All. Each of our schools is excellent at (at least) one thing (and often many, many things). Through our District Spotlight Series, we present opportunities for leaders at all levels in our work to connect with those who are engaging with specific aspects of our work that, as Sinek says in the passage to the right, present our colleagues as “Worthy Rivals who can help us become better players.”

We want to take a moment to highlight the work that we have observed thus far at [PS 221](#) (Social Emotional Learning), [PS 18](#) (Algebra 4 All), [PS 133](#), (Computer

Science), and [PS 115](#) (Universal Literacy) and thank those communities for presenting themselves as Worthy Rivals for their colleagues so that they might move closer to what is next in their journeys.

Prepare for Existential Flexibility

For all of our successes (and there are, beautifully, too many to put in any one letter), we have to face the fact that our current models of instruction are not meeting the needs of ALL of the students in our charge. This reality is not for lack of good intentions, nor is it from a lack of belief that every student can meet with success. In this vein, we might view ourselves as in the middle of an Existential Flex. We are in the middle of supporting our schools through a reframing of how they talk about their work, seeking to name how it fits within the [Instructional Leadership Framework](#).

Existential Flexibility is the capacity to initiate an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic course in order to more effectively advance a Just Cause. It is an infinite-minded player's appreciation for the unpredictable that allows them to make these kinds of changes.

-The Infinite Game, p. 185

A critical subset of this work is grappling with the extent to which students are able to connect to their teachers' instruction. We want to give students mirrors that reflect the greatness of who their people are, and windows into the world that allow students to connect across cultures. To this end, we have begun to work with schools to evaluate the extent to which existing curriculum is aligned to New York State's [Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#). A central figure in the development of this work has been Gloria Ladsen-Billings, who identifies three key concepts that we are committed to keeping at the center of our work. When we believe in all students, we are invested in their **academic success**. When we are knowledgeable about our students, we are honoring their **cultural competence**. When we articulate a vision for our students, we are respecting the development of their **critical consciousness**.

Demonstrate the Courage to Lead

The Courage to Lead is a willingness to take risks for the good of an unknown future. And the risks are real. For it is much easier to tinker with the month, the quarter or the year, but to make decisions with an eye to the distant future is much more difficult.

-The Infinite Game, pp. 199-200

As the reverend doctor Bryant Marks states, "for fear of imperfection, we do not begin." Work towards our achieving such a state of equity for our students requires all of us to vulnerability to present ourselves as learners, sometimes without the answer at-the-ready, sitting in discomfort. Critical the navigation of such discomfort has been the creation of Emotionally-Intelligent Charters so that we don't lose sight of the horizon (read: our *Why*) as we grapple with the present.

These Charters are written at the beginning of a journey, when spirits are high, minds are open, and the yet-to-be written story is as attractive (and intimidating) as a blank canvas is to an artist. The energy of team, newly formed for a year is powerful; it is vital that the magic of those early moments is memorialized in a way that all members of team can see themselves in it, and can see the purpose of the team's journey—their Just Cause—through its lens. This is because Charters aren't written for September; they are written for the winter. They are written for when the daylight wanes, when the icy wind gets through that extra layer, and most of all, for when the plan as it was written goes off-script, and we nothing but those words to clothe us, and our *North Star* to guide us.

We want to thank everyone in the community that has contributed to our work in keeping students at the center of everything we do. We endeavor to capture all the excellence in District 26 and celebrate it with the world. If something from your corner of the district is resulting in a transformative experience for kids, Tweet it to us @D26Team: Twitter is *how* we know about *what* you're doing in service of your *Why*.

Sincerely, Danielle Giunta and the District 26 Team