

BRIEF

Equity: Definitions and perspectives from US educators

April 2023



KEY FINDINGS

- The importance of equity was clearly agreed upon by US educators and district/school leaders, with equity being defined in a similar manner: ensure that every student receives the resources and support they need to succeed in learning.
- Family support emerged as a new component in the definition of equity.
- Almost all study participants shared challenges in implementing effective strategies and initiatives to address equity issues.
- The political climate, combined with impacts of the pandemic, increased the focus on equity, specifically on the needs of the individual child instead of overall systemic inequities.
- Communicating the value of and actions needed to achieve equity continues to be a challenge, especially in polarized communities.

Study background

In 2022, NWEA® conducted a study to better understand how teachers, school leaders, and district leaders understood and defined equity. Using a blind study format in which the participants were not aware that the research was for NWEA, the research team conducted 61 online interviews. Participants represented the education leader and teacher population in US public schools.

The study explored how K-12 district and school leaders and teachers do the following:

- Define equity and what it should look like for their students
- Identify the types and sources of inequity that exist for their students
- Work to achieve equity for their students and determine the key hurdles to overcome
- Think and act differently about equity based on their district's political environment and other defining factors (e.g., demographics)

Equity generates emotional responses from educators—both positive and negative

All study participants defined equity in a very similar manner: ensure that every student receives the resources and support they need to succeed in learning. All agreed that learning is a personalized path for each student and that some need more support than others to learn and grow.

Most district administrators expressed mixed feelings regarding hearing the term *equity*. While many feel passionate about improving equity, some are also filled with dread about the “loaded” term, especially those who have experienced politicized pushback from their community. Administrators also reported spending time calming fears, addressing misinformation, and helping parents and community members understand the benefits of focusing on equity.

School leaders believe equity is important but also find initiatives difficult to implement. Participants shared they have a good understanding of both student and school-level inequities and the need to invest in students' and teachers' success. In their experience, however, health (COVID-19), behavior, and emotional issues have been all-consuming. They also expressed frustration with a perceived lack of support or absence of a clear plan from the district level that highlights a path toward accomplishing equity initiatives.

Teachers in the study shared feeling overwhelmed and wanting clearer guidance on how to implement equity work. In addition, they shared their hunger for more resources, help, and support. Participants highlighted diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in the definition of equity and also shared a fourth component specific to education: family support. The shift to virtual learning during the pandemic provided an unprecedented window into the lives of students. The increased visibility and understanding of their world outside of school generated empathy for students and highlighted the role family support plays in student success.

The nature of equity is evolving and complex

Pandemic disruptions intensified existing issues related to inequity, including the dramatic negative impact on academic achievement and gains, behavioral trauma to students, low staff morale, and heightened political tension. In short, the pandemic exacerbated inequities for historically marginalized student groups and revealed previously overlooked groups (e.g., the “invisible middle” of students who used to “get by”). Participants stated that challenges facing specific students—including students with low socioeconomic status, Black males, immigrants who don’t speak Spanish, students with mental health struggles, and LGBTQ+ students—are becoming better recognized. Unfortunately, they added that competing resources and recognition of newer subgroups make it difficult to adequately address equity issues impacting all.

“Nontraditional gender is the biggest struggle. It is not our place to make a judgment. It is our place to educate the kids regardless of who they are.”

– Tracy, Curriculum Developer, MO

Race may lose priority as evolving needs arise

“The group that we have not closed the gap on is African Americans. They are not appropriately served. There are a lot of resources, but it hasn’t been prescriptive. They are missing out on the ‘belonging’ aspect.”

– Lori, Principal, VA

Among district leaders in the study, many shared a desire to address every child’s needs instead of focusing initiatives by subgroups. COVID-19-created inequities, combined with a societal focus on systemic racism, increased fears of “typecasting” and appeared to lower the priority to implement antiracism strategies. District leaders stated that communities often place a lack of importance on the role of historical inequities in creating achievement gaps today and on the way unconscious bias further perpetrates those inequities, with community members holding more of a “fix the here and now” attitude. Among districts in communities that identify as more progressive (including those in conservative states), study participants said race remains a central tenet of equity strategy. Within more conservative communities, study participants said they are doing a lot of “tiptoeing” around race, which requires administrators to find new language to use within their community.

“If we use the term ‘equity,’ people are suspicious.... If we talk about providing opportunities to all kids, no one has a problem with that.”

– Dennis, Principal, NY

Race is even less of a focus in more homogenous communities. Study participants representing districts in all-Anglo communities (particularly in rural settings), said the lack of diversity seems to lessen the importance of teaching about racial issues. They shared they have a desire to increase staff diversity but find a lack of diverse candidates. In all-Black or all-Hispanic communities (majority-minority areas), there is also less concern expressed about race as a driver of inequity. The main issue in those settings is getting equitable funding for their schools to achieve equity for all.

Communicating about the value of and actions needed for equity is difficult

“At least we’re talking about it now.”

– Lori, Principal, VA, and DeMonica, Principal, TX

While equity is broadly accepted as being essential for students to reach their potential and is a key focus area even in polarized education environments, participants stated their district’s equity vision is often poorly formulated and communicated. For example, teachers reported not understanding the equity initiatives school leaders implement, while school leaders expressed they are only implementing practices handed down by district leaders. Across every layer of education, from teachers to district leaders, the initiatives are often perceived as too limited, too slow, and

lacking purpose and efficacy. Study participants stated that they feel comfortable communicating the general benefits of equity as it relates to student learning and growth; however, they said they don't feel knowledgeable or comfortable discussing additional value equity can bring, such as social cohesion and economic prosperity.

What strategies work to achieve equity?

- District administrators in the study reported support for modifying policies and increasing resources to support equity initiatives; these measures include performing interventions; making assessment data more actionable by providing coaches to help interpret data and create student learning paths; ensuring more tools and resources are available to students (e.g., technical devices, Wi-Fi at home, after-school programs, food); creating a diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility staff position or committee; offering more professional learning to staff; adding more mental health supports with school therapists; and conducting equity audits.
- School leaders stated that the key is creating more inclusivity and belonging within the school, especially for traditionally marginalized students, by increasing the diversity of teachers and learning materials, creating programs dedicated to the interest and culture of diverse students, and developing safe spaces. They added that for students with specific learning needs, providing specialized teachers, learning spaces, and resources to access learning has also been successful.
- Teachers described a greater focus on understanding the barriers and opportunities for each student. They emphasized using and understanding individual student data to inform next steps. They also shared that they continue to rely on traditional resources and approaches, which include assessment and academic data combined with intervention plans, evaluation of social-emotional learning, behavior records, school counselors, and parent connections and outreach.

What barriers are in the way?

- District administrators reported key barriers to equity initiatives include political disruptions, ongoing COVID-19 fallout, and systemic and structural changes fraught with funding challenges. Additional complexities include the following:
 - Managing broad changes to teaching and learning frameworks
 - Determining approaches to student engagement and disciplinary issues
 - Addressing diverse professional-learning needs from staff to build cooperation and understanding
 - Fundraising for new programs, facilities, and student resources
- School leaders reported their top barriers are developing a strong school climate, addressing social-emotional learning, creating behavioral supports to open lines of communication, building understanding for diverse cultures and backgrounds, and nurturing a sense of safety and belong. They cited the need for more data literacy for their teachers to support better customized instruction that drives equitable educational practices. Contending with staff turnover and morale, addressing student health and disciplinary issues, and creating better engagement with families also create significant barriers.
- Teachers in the study said connecting school and district initiatives with classroom implementation is challenging and stated they often adopt their own ideas and approaches. Many expressed a lack of support by administration or a lack of understanding as to “the why” of an initiative or change. These challenges add to their overall low morale, and many stated they don't know how or don't have the tools to make changes.

Overall, there is a strong commitment to investing in equity, but disconnected systems emerged as a clear theme among study participants. School leaders, for example, feel they don't receive a clear, consistent vision for equity or coherent actionable solutions supported by resources, and they often view talk of equity as just talk. This sentiment is shared by district leaders, who are challenged with finding funds, stating clear benefits, and generating support from their communities for equity initiatives—all while navigating polarizing environments and disruptions. This impacts teachers who are overwhelmed by the immediate needs of their classroom and lack clarity about what equity-focused actions school leaders will support.



Recommendations

Across the study, participants stated that the education community must commit to tough conversations about equity. They must define what it means within their own communities and articulate the value of removing barriers to opportunities for all students. They also broadly suggested that discussion and initiatives must move beyond a “one size fits all” model and expand to find ways to make the school experience more personal and focused on the needs of the individual student. To address the disconnectedness, many suggested the need for cross-functional teams that can provide actionable plans and processes.

At the school level, participants suggested a focus on school environment that first addresses emotional and behavioral factors to build the room for equity initiatives. They shared that students’ emotional needs must be met first, even before academic needs. School leaders shared a greater need to build teacher awareness by using data to better illuminate equity needs and priorities.

“Create an educator boot camp ... [where teachers can] examine [their] own views and practices and how that plays out in classrooms.”

– Lori, Principal, VA, and DeMonica, Principal, TX

A final note from participants was a need for accountability centered on open discussions and clarity regarding the outcomes they are striving to meet.



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