Educational Equity:
An Examination of Current Practices in the United States

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The **National Equity Project** formally defines educational equity as a function where “each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.”

(National Equity Project, n.d.)
Introduction

The majority of students in the K-12 public education system attend mid-to-high poverty schools, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019) which frequently results in lower educational outcomes. Furthermore, there is a disproportionate number of Black and Latino students who attend high-poverty public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), which perpetuates the racial achievement gaps in academic outcomes. One of the critical factors that contribute to this educational inequity in schools of poverty is the lack of resources, instructional materials, and financial support. Educational equity is defined by the varying needs of students across this country who receive individualized support to achieve academic and social success.

The National Equity Project, a leadership and systems change organization committed to increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining communities, formally defines educational equity as a function where, “each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential (National Equity Project, n.d.).” More specifically, The National Equity Project further elaborates that working toward equity involves three different approaches (National Equity Project, n.d.):

• Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor;
• Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children; and
• Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents, and interests that every human possesses.

Educational equity is impacted by many contributing factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, learning disability status, and other social or cultural factors. In order to achieve educational equity, students who hold unique identities, regardless of these contributing factors, should receive an adequate amount of resources, human capital, instructional time, and all other encompassing academic and social support to ensure that they are learning and growing at their full potential. School district leaders, administrators, teachers, policymakers, and elected officials play an instrumental role in ensuring that students receive the appropriate resources they need to succeed.
The National Challenge

Students across the United States who attend Title I schools or local education agencies with high concentrations of students from low-income families described in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) as “Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” are more likely to have lower academic outcomes than their more affluent counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Research from The Learning Policy Institute shows that teachers in Title I schools are more likely to experience turnover than teachers who work at non-Title I schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). As indicated in the same research report, “Turnover rates are 50% higher for teachers in Title I schools, which serve more low-income students.” This finding suggests that students who attend Title I schools are more likely to experience an inconsistent set of teachers who may not have the appropriate working conditions or resources to deliver high-quality instruction.

Furthermore, the K-12 public education system in the United States has insufficiently supported the academic success of students with diverse educational needs, particularly Black and Latino students from low-income backgrounds. The lack of support has resulted in low math and reading test scores, stagnant high school graduation rates, and low college completion rates for these students (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Students of color are more likely to attend public schools that serve predominantly low-income students, which shows a strong correlation with low educational achievement (Reardon, Cimpian, & Weathers, 2015).
The majority of students attending high-poverty schools, schools with large percentages of free or reduced lunch, are students of color. In 2010, 37.3% of Black and Latino students attended public schools that serve at least 75% of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, while only 5.7% of White students attended similar schools (National Equity Atlas, 2014). In 2014, 40.8% of Black and Latino students attended public schools that serve at least 75% of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, while only 8.5% of White students attended similar schools (National Equity Atlas, 2014).

Boschma and Brownst (2016) reported that one of the largest indicators of racial academic gaps for students exists when students are surrounded by other students who live in poverty. When students of color are primarily in schools that are concentrated in high-poverty areas, they are stymied by environments with economic and social conditions that perpetuate low-performing academic results.

One of the critical outcomes that demonstrate this inequitable gap is the achievement gap between White-Black students and White-Latino students. The Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis defines the racial achievement gap as the “differences in the average standardized test scores of White and Black or White and Hispanic students” (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, n.d.). Historically, White students have outperformed Black and Latino students based on tests in math and reading from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). As part of the Stanford Center’s Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project, the researchers found that racial achievement gaps are strongly correlated with racial, socioeconomic disparities:

One potential explanation for racial achievement gaps is that they are largely due to socioeconomic disparities between White, Black, and Hispanic families. Black and Hispanic children’s parents typically have lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment than White children’s parents. Because higher-income and more-educated families typically can provide more educational opportunities for their children, family socioeconomic resources are strongly related to educational outcomes. If racial, socioeconomic disparities are the primary explanation for racial achievement gaps, we would expect achievement gaps to be largest in places where racial, socioeconomic disparities are largest, and we would expect them to be zero in places where there is no racial, socioeconomic inequality. (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis)

Across the United States, school districts that serve lower-income, segregated neighborhoods have historically been underfunded and under-resourced, which impacts the overall academic achievement of students. These educational gaps are exacerbated by inequitable policies and funding structures that further disadvantage specific populations of students.
School funding provides the foundation for school operations and structure. In terms of education finance, equity is defined as providing additional funding and resources to support groups of students who have historically been underserved and underfunded within their school districts. Equitable funding is critical because it ties directly to student achievement. A 2016 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that additional school funding is linked to better academic outcomes for low-income students (Lafortune, Rothstein, & Schanzenbach, 2016). Additionally, low-income students who receive a 10% increase in additional per-pupil funding throughout their K-12 schooling will earn an average of 10% more in wages as adults (Jackson, Johnson, & Perisco, 2015). Clearly, these findings provide evidence that students from low-income neighborhoods will improve their academic outcomes and increase living wages if they receive additional K-12 funding.

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Nationally, per-student funding is increasing. However, these funds are not addressing the direct needs of our most vulnerable students. High poverty districts receive approximately $1,000 less per student than the lowest poverty districts (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). The poorest school districts across the country typically receive 15% less funding per-pupil than their affluent counterparts (Brown, 2015). Funding gaps are even higher for districts serving students of color. Districts serving the most students of color receive $1,800 or 13% less per student than districts serving fewer students of color (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018).

Across the country, there is considerable variation in how states are addressing equitable funding for students in poverty and students of color. Many states are demonstrating progressiveness in changing funding policies; however, the majority of states are not progressive with equitable funding. In 2018, 20 states provided more funding to their highest poverty districts than to low poverty districts, and 14 states provided at least 5% more funding to districts that serve higher numbers of students of color (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018).
Reading figures 1 and 2: In states shaded in green, the highest poverty districts receive at least 5 percent more in state and local funds per student than the lowest poverty districts; in states shaded in red, they receive at least 5 percent less. Gray shading indicates similar levels of funding for the highest and lowest poverty districts. The figures show that Illinois’ highest poverty districts received 19% less in state and local funds than its lowest poverty districts. Note: Data from Ohio are excluded from this chart because of anomalies in the way Ohio reported its fiscal data to the federal government. Hawaii was excluded because it is one district, the District of Columbia, and was excluded because it is not a state. Alaska and Nevada are also excluded because their student populations are heavily concentrated in certain districts and could not be sorted into quartiles.

Source: The Education Trust
Among progressive states, California, New Jersey, and Wyoming have created school finance models that provide additional money to low-income students and allocated sufficient funds to students who attend moderate and high-income schools. “Sufficient funds” refer to the adequacy of per-pupil funding at a school district level. For example, for every dollar that New Jersey spends on low poverty school districts, the state spends $6.61 on high poverty school districts (Lafortune et al., 2018). In California, the state has adopted an equitable funding model known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that has progressively provided additional funding to low-income school districts and created a permanent structural change to allow for more dollars to go to high-need students. LCFF provides additional funds to school districts that serve a large population of English learners, low-income students, and foster youth (Fensterwald, 2013).

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To support equitable funding across the United States, the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017) recommend that state chiefs lead and build political support for weighted student funding formulas that advance equity, improve student outcomes and facilitate achievement of state educational goals. Similarly, the Equity and Excellence Commission (United States Department of Education, 2015) recommends creating finance systems that allow states to focus on the content and performance standards for all students:

- Adopt and implement a school finance system that will provide equitable and sufficient funding for all students to achieve state content and performance standards. Equitable resources may in some cases mean more than equal investment; as is often the case in other advanced nations, it includes the provision of additional resources to address the academic and other needs of low-income students, students with disabilities and English language learners, and for districts and schools serving large concentrations of low-income students and those in remote areas.
(United States Department of Education, 2015, p. 18-19)

At a federal level, the government has attempted to provide equitable and additional funding to low-income students through programs such as Title I, which aims to provide financial assistance to school districts with a high number of low-income students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Unfortunately, states that serve a high concentration of low-income students tend to receive far less Title I funding than other states due to an inequitable federal funding formula (Frey, 2016). States receive additional Title I funds based on the size of districts as opposed to the percentage of students who are low-income, which leads to disproportionate federal funding.
The federal Title I funding source comprises less than 10% of per-pupil spending (United States Census Bureau, 2015). It adds approximately 5% more per student than would otherwise be spent (approximately $500 per student) (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015). Additionally, funds are intended for whole-school programs and are not specific to student populations. Although the intention of providing Title I funding is to support schools in serving disadvantaged students, states and localities are responsible for providing the remaining sources of funding for these students.

As progressive states have shown, progress can be made to reverse inequitable funding practices in education. The following questions should be addressed when considering equity in education financing:

- Will the school finance model provide the funding needed to support groups of students at risk for lower academic achievement?
- Will underserved students receive the appropriate amount of programs and services that provide positive educational outcomes?
- Should there be additional student groups added to the list of underserved students?
- Is financial aid prioritized to provide resources where they are most needed?
- Are practices in place to regularly evaluate the adequacy of funding across schools, districts, and student populations?

**PROGRESSIVE PRACTICE Student-Based Funding Allocation**

Student-based allocation refers to districts using a fixed-dollar increment per student. Per-pupil funding in student-based allocation districts are weighted based on student characteristics such as language status, ability status, poverty, or grade level. Denver Public Schools began using student-based allocation in 2008 and now distributes 37.6% of its budget using a student-based allocation model that accounts for student factors such as low-income, disability status, and English learning (Aspen Institute, 2018).
Educational Equity in Staffing

Principals, teachers, instructional coaches, and aides all influence student achievement. Across the United States, staffing is a critical component in equitable education. Equitable staffing refers to the appropriate number of high-quality and effective teachers and educational support staff that is needed to address the varying needs of schools based on environmental conditions. An example would be the percentage of students who identify as English learners, students who are in the foster care system, and students who have learning disabilities. Historically, high-quality and effective teachers are more likely to be staffed in predominantly White and affluent schools as opposed to schools that serve low-income students and students of color (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2011).

Gagnon and Mattingly (2012) reported that schools that serve low-income students and students of color are more likely to have teachers who are new to the profession or do not have the appropriate credentials to teach in specific subject areas. Schools serving the most students of color are 1.5 times more likely to employ novice teachers than schools serving the fewest students of color (United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Furthermore, teachers who are staffed in high-poverty schools have a higher turnover rate than teachers who are staffed in low-poverty schools, which negatively impacts student achievement for students of color (Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wycoff, 2013). Unfortunately, students who attend high-poverty schools are less likely to have an equitable distribution of high-quality and effective teachers with many years of experience. The lack of adequate and appropriate staffing only further exacerbates educational inequity.

In 2012, The New Teacher Project conducted a study with 90,000 teachers across four large urban school districts about the likelihood of a school replacing a highly-effective teacher when they leave an average school and a low-performing school (The New Teacher Project, 2012). The researchers found that when a highly-effective teacher leaves an average school, there is a 1 out of 6 likelihood that the replacement teacher would be of similar quality. When a highly effective teacher leaves a low-performing school, there is a 1 out of 11 likelihood that the replacement teacher would be of similar quality (The New Teacher Project, 2012). This research suggests that low-performing schools are less likely to be re-staffed by an effective teacher when schools are unable to retain effective teachers.

Additionally, across the country, effective teachers select school districts that will pay them a higher amount in comparison to their lower-performing counterparts in terms of their wages (Murnane & Steel, 2007). Even though there are effective teachers who are willing to work below their relative wage, there are not enough teachers willing to work below their value to match the teacher labor markets of effective teachers (Murnane & Steel, 2007). Unfortunately, mid-to-high poverty schools have far less spending than affluent school districts, so effective teachers are more likely to select schools that meet their salary requirements.
PROGRESSIVE PRACTICE: Teacher and Administrator Performance

New Haven Public Schools in Connecticut has also launched a comprehensive reform strategy—The School Change Initiative—to maximize New Haven’s potential as a city, demonstrate the community’s commitment to its children, grow the economy, and cultivate a strong and skilled workforce. The goals of the initiative are to close the gap between the performance of New Haven students and the rest of the state within five years, cut the dropout rate in half and ensure that every graduating student has the academic ability and the financial resources to attend and succeed in college. Along with other efforts, the district is improving methods for recruiting, evaluating and developing its teachers and administrators. The new system includes formal recognition of high-performing teachers and administrators... as well as linkage to standards-based observations of classroom practice; removal of low-performing teachers within one school year if they don’t improve after fair evaluation and mentoring; regular and comprehensive feedback for administrators, with professional consequences depending on performance; and an external validation process for teachers receiving the highest and lowest rankings (United States Department of Education, 2015).
Although these problems exist, staffing inequities can be addressed within school systems. To do so, administrators need to evaluate school and district practices, data, and educational priorities to identify opportunities for improving access to equitable education. The following questions should be considered (Atchison, Diffey, Rafa, & Sarubbi, 2017).

- Are teacher retention and attrition rates tracked by school and by district?
- Do teacher preparation, certification, and professional development policies for recruiting, retaining, and supporting a diverse workforce address the needs of diverse students?
- Do teachers receive training on effectively integrating technology in classrooms?
- Are practices of highly effective teachers tracked and shared across schools and districts?
- Do professional development practices support equipping teachers with the skills needed to deliver high-quality instruction?
- Do administrators support and promote collaboration among teaching teams?
- Are instructional practices standards-based across subject areas and grade levels?
- Are teachers supported in implementing data-driven strategies and practices?
- Do school systems prioritize the development of cultural competencies for meeting all students’ needs?
Educational Equity with Instructional Resources and Approaches

Just as inequities are observed in relation to funding and staffing, instructional equity is a significant issue that impacts students’ access to high-quality educational experiences and opportunities for achieving academic standards and goals. In terms of the allocation and distribution of high-quality instructional resources, resource equity is defined as the “allocation and use of resources—people, time, and money—to create student experiences that enable all children to reach empowering, rigorous learning outcomes, no matter their race or income (Travers, 2018).” Through this context, students of color, students in poverty, and other at-risk populations attending low-income schools have historically received unequal access to high-level courses and curriculum in comparison to White students (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Students are exposed to environments with lower educational expectations, and instructional approaches do not reflect students’ culture and ethnicity in ways that enhance the relevancy of learning. They are also not afforded the same opportunities to access and utilize technology in ways that prepare them for college and career.

Standards-Aligned, Rigorous Instruction.

High-quality instruction is standards-based and research-validated. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) specifies that adopted educational programs should have at least one level of scientific evidence for effectiveness (ESSA, 2015). However, across the country, there is a significant gap between state standard assessments and the quality of instructional materials that students of color and low-income students receive (Dabrowski & Santelises, 2015). The lack of instructional materials that meet rigorous state and federal standards of effectiveness demonstrates the gap that exists for students who attend mid-to-high poverty schools in comparison to students who attend more affluent schools. The unequal and inequitable distribution of rigorous instructional resources provides further evidence that students from marginalized communities are not provided the appropriate supports to succeed.

In terms of access to high school courses that prepare students for college, a 2018 report conducted by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that high-poverty schools are less likely to provide college-preparatory math and science courses that four-year colleges expect students to complete as part of their admission process (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Furthermore, the researchers at the GAO also found that high-poverty schools are less likely to offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses to prepare students for the rigor of college and potentially earn credit for college (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Policymakers and state leaders should implement policies that ensure there is more access to college-preparatory courses and AP courses for diverse student populations.
Culturally Responsive Instruction.

Not only is access to high-quality standards-based instruction inequitable, but racial disparities exist across this country in terms of teacher diversity and representation for diverse student populations. According to a report conducted by the United States Department of Education (2016), the teaching workforce in the 2011–12 school year had the following racial breakdown: 84% White, 7% Black, 7% Hispanic, and fewer than 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander (United States Department of Education, Policy and Program Studies Service Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, Policy, and Program Studies Service, 2016). Unfortunately, this does not represent racial diversity of the student population of the United States, where over 50% of students are non-White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The lack of teacher diversity may contribute to the racial biases that exist in classrooms and limit opportunities for students to receive instruction that is racially and culturally relevant to their experience.

Black students who are matched to at least one same-race teacher in primary school increases the likelihood of students attending a four-year university and decreases the likelihood of students dropping out of high school. (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017)

A report conducted by the United States Department of Education shows that only 7% of the teacher workforce in the 2011-12 school year was Black. Specifically, only 2% of the entire teaching workforce was represented by Black male teachers. Black students who are matched to at least one same-race teacher in primary school increase the probability of students attending a four-year university and decreases the likelihood of students dropping out of high school (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017). This study demonstrates that teacher diversity has a positive impact on students of color, and there needs to be more intentional work in diversifying the teacher workforce to reflect and represent racial and cultural diversity in schools explicitly.

The integration and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy is a critical factor when delivering equitable instructional practices for diverse populations of students. Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge (2015) reported that non-Black teachers have lower expectations for Black students in comparison to White students, which further perpetuates the inequitable distribution of resources and people across the country. To address this systemic inequity, policymakers and school systems leaders should consider implementing implicit bias training for teachers and
administrators (Schwartz, 2019) and institute practices that support culturally responsive instruction. For example, the Long Beach Unified School District in California has developed a partnership with an advocacy organization to implement voluntary training focused on implicit bias and relationship-centered schools (Schwartz, 2019).

**Progressive Practice: Culturally Relevant Learning Materials**
Vancouver Public Schools Superintendent Steve Webb. “Our curriculum-review team looks for inclusivity, cultural bias, and equitable gender representation. We want every student in our school to see themselves in some way, shape, or form in the learning experience and the content (Campbell, 2020).
Equitable Use of Technology.
As technology becomes more pervasive in schools, the use of technology holds promise for addressing instructional inequities. Implementing high quality, standards-based programs that are responsive to students’ instructional needs and integrating digital tools that support the development of higher-order thinking can provide an opportunity for improving achievement for all students. However, digital divides exist and persist in the form of disparities between students who use technology to create, design, build, explore, and collaborate and those who use technology to consume media. According to the United States Office of Educational Technology (2017), “access to connectivity and devices does not guarantee access to engaging educational experiences or quality education.”

“One of the least equitable things we do is to treat all students the same. Adjusting the pace and path of learning can be transformational.”
(Culatta, 2014)

In a study that examined seven years of technology integration in Florida schools, results indicated that students with low socioeconomic status generally used computer software more for computer-directed activities like practice and remedial work. In contrast, students with high socioeconomic status used software for creating and collaborating with others (Dawson, Hohlfelda, Ritzhaupt, & Wilson, 2017). Additionally, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013) found that 4 out of 10 (39%) teachers of low-income students feel that their respective schools are not effectively using technology for learning purposes while only 15% of teachers of higher-income students feel this way about their schools (Drake, 2013). The results of this study and survey suggest that the availability of technology and instructional materials does not guarantee that students will receive effective instruction.

Teachers and school leaders should use digital tools in ways that support engaged, meaningful learning, and address the instructional needs of students across the economic spectrum. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2016) states, “students must be prepared to thrive in a constantly evolving technological landscape.” ISTE student standards emphasize that all students need to become empowered learners who are adept at global collaboration, creative communication, computational thinking, innovative design, and knowledge construction to prepare for future jobs and productive integration in society (ISTE, 2016). Supporting these standards is particularly important for marginalized groups of students who may experience
impoverished learning environments that limit opportunities for the development of skills that are critical for college and career readiness.

All students deserve access to high-quality educational materials, instruction, and tools. When evaluating the quality of learning materials, access and utilization of technology, cultural bias and culturally responsive teaching, the following questions should be considered by policymakers and school leaders:

- Are the school districts’ and schools’ instructional materials standards-based and research-validated?
- Are students receiving instructional materials that are personalized to their learning needs?
- Do teachers communicate high expectations for all students?
- What percentage of high school students have access to college-preparatory math and science courses?
- Will underserved students be taught in learning environments that provide culturally relevant pedagogy?
- Is technology being used effectively in classrooms with purposeful integration and implementation?
- Is technology being used in classrooms for students to create, design, build, explore, and collaborate?
- Are many teacher candidates of color being considered for positions at my school site?
In addressing educational equity, funding allocations, instructional resources and approaches, and staffing of schools and districts impact the degree to which all students have the opportunity to receive what they need to develop their academic and social potential. The conditions of educational equity are defined, but not limited by the funding, instructional resources and approaches, and staffing of schools and school districts across this country. Historically, national achievement gaps for National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) outcomes in both reading and math have narrowed between racial groups since 1980 (United States Government of Accountability Office, 2018); however, non-White school districts across this country receive $23 billion less than White school districts despite serving the same number of students (EdBuild, 2019). This finding suggests that even though racial disparity gaps have slightly narrowed over the past forty years, school districts and states need to provide adequate and equitable funding needed in mid-to-high poverty schools to access high-quality instructional resources and attract effective teachers. At the end of the day, educational equity is achieved when students who hold unique identities receive an adequate amount of resources, human capital, instructional time, and all other encompassing academic and social support to ensure that they are learning and growing to their full potential.

**Progressive Practice: Examining bias in educational systems**

“As we examine the way in which systems are designed and structured, we’ve tried to figure out if there are limitations or barriers that are unintentionally generating inequitable outcomes. For example, a number of years ago, we revisited the way in which we serve our highly capable students. The referral process, by policy and by practice, was a matter of parent self-referral. Of course, when you look at the representation of students that were being served in our three elementary self-contained, highly capable magnet programs, they were disproportionately represented by Caucasian students, students of affluence, and geographically located in our northern part of the district, which is our more suburban end of the SES continuum. If you’re gonna lead with equity and excellence for all, you have to start deliberately examining whether or not the outcomes are in fact, consistent with that value set.”

“In response, we examined our process, revised our policy, and revised the program delivery. We’ve since seen a significant increase in the number of students who are now being served in our highly capable program and an expansion of highly capable services at every single one of our elementary schools, not just at three. We’ve realized that students of poverty have significantly increased in terms of their participation and placement in highly capable services.” Vancouver Public Schools Steve Webb Superintendent (Campbell, 2020)
References


Every Student Succeeds Act 2015 (Congress) s.1177 (U.S.A).


