



Fostering Equity in Education

Research and guidance offers practical advice to schools on ensuring and building a school culture where all students can succeed

This article is intended to start a conversation around education equity in Wisconsin school districts. The ideas and strategies presented in this article are by no means an exhaustive list. We also recognize that many school districts in our state have been implementing these strategies and have made education equity a focus.

Earlier this summer, the WASB Board of Directors adopted a statement on equity and its role in public education:

We affirm in our actions that each student can, will, and shall learn. We recognize that based on factors including, but not limited to, disability, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, not all students receive equitable educational opportunities. Educational equity is the intentional allocation of resources, instruction, and opportunities to meet the specific identified needs of students and staff in the local school community.

— Approved by the WASB Board of Directors, June 2018

As school leaders, we continually strive to create environments where all students are supported and can be successful. We have much to be proud of in Wisconsin's public schools, let's make sure all of our students are getting the education they deserve.

The article that follows is gathered from a collection of resources and guidance from education organizations. The introduction of this article was excerpted from the Center of Public Education's research brief "Educational Equity: What Does It Mean? How Do We Know When We Reach It?"

The section titled "Best Practices in Educational Equity" section was excerpted from a report of the same title from Hanover Research, a global research and analytics firm that provides custom research. The last section, "What Can School Board Members Do?" is from the Panasonic Foundation, which provides direct technical assistance to support system effectiveness with attention focused on equity challenges in the school system.

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It's been more than 60 years since the U.S. Supreme Court declared education "a right which must be made available to all on equal terms." In ruling that separate was in fact not equal, *Brown v. Board of Education* forced federal, state and local governments to open public schools to all children in the community. The decision marked a huge victory for the civil rights movement.

Yet integrating school buildings would prove to be just the first step in an ongoing journey toward educational equity in the nation. There remained — and still remain — structural and social barriers to making a world-class public education "available to all on equal terms." In addition, our ideas about equity have evolved to encompass more than a guarantee that school doors will be open to every child. Advocates are increasingly concerned with allocating the resources and opportunities to learn that will equip all students for success after high school, recognizing that some students require more support than others to get there.

This has led many to argue for a view of equity that sets the goal as "adequacy," that is, the principle that all students should receive "an adequate education" whatever it takes to provide it (Brighthouse & Swift, 2008). As an example of what the difference means in practice, consider a district that has a policy of one reading specialist per elementary school. Everyone would agree that this is an equal distribution. However, School A has 15 students who are reading below grade level whereas School B has 250 below-grade-level readers. Equal distribution is therefore not providing adequate services to the children in School B because the needs in that school are obviously much greater.

■ Best Practices in Educational Equity

Teachers can ensure that students of all backgrounds receive equitable instruction by acknowledging students' cultural heritage and accommodating multiple modes of learning. By recognizing and integrating multiple

perspectives into instruction, teachers help students feel comfortable in their classroom environment and enhance learning for all students. Districts should encourage honest discussions among teachers about how to best support students with diverse needs, and provide training on culturally responsive teaching practices.

Schools can create welcoming environments for diverse families by showcasing student diversity and offering parent education activities. For example, schools can post signs in multiple languages, create a parent room with bilingual resources, and increase the visibility of bilingual staff. In particular, districts should make efforts to explain complex school operations, such as standardized testing, selection for gifted and talented programs, and the college application process. Some districts embrace a "community school" model and engage diverse families by offering English classes, housing support, and job coaching to extend the services provided to families.

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WASB Policy Resources

For more than 40 years, WASB Policy Services staff have been highlighting ways in which school boards can adopt local policies that promote student achievement and address the educational and other needs of students from a variety of backgrounds in an equitable way. This work continues through the dissemination of sample school district policies, WASB policy publications (Policy Perspectives and The FOCUS), and through other resources such as the Policy Resource Guide. The WASB encourages Wisconsin school boards to base their school district policies on local community needs, interests and requirements. Not every school or school district is the same or has the same problems, issues or needs. Local school board policies should reflect the needs of the district and their students and should be able to be implemented using the resources available in the district.



Schools can engage hard-to-reach families by communicating in their home language, meeting them in their own communities, and taking steps to make family participation easier. For example, schools can prepare welcome DVDs in multiple languages, hold events in local communities, build parent networks for families who speak the same language, and provide transportation to school-based events.

Experts find that some types of parent engagement programs are more impactful on student learning than others. For example, meet-and-greet forums like celebrations, fundraisers, and performances have a lower impact on student learning than more consistent communication that focuses on parent empowerment. This kind of communication may include positive phone calls home, classroom observations, weekly data-sharing folders, and modeling learning support strategies.

Educators can support high-mobility

students by ensuring timely transfer of records, creating welcome packets for new families, and taking steps to ensure that new students feel welcome. To welcome new families to the school, school leaders should create orientation materials for new families and follow up with parents during their child’s first few weeks at school to ensure the transition is going smoothly. Further, student “ambassadors” can assist in building community and provide a buddy system at the school or classroom level to support new students.

Districts can promote equitable discipline by implementing tiered disciplinary policies. In contrast with zero-tolerance policies, tiered disciplinary policies enact consequences of misbehavior that are proportional to the harm caused. Experts encourage schools to implement positive disciplinary programs, such as restorative justice, and focus on improving school climate in order to facilitate equitable disciplinary practices.

Experts recommend that schools use scores on standards-based tests administered to all students as part of the process to identify students who are likely to succeed in advanced courses. Prerequisite courses, minimum grade point averages, and teacher or counselor recommendations may all serve as barriers to enrolling underrepresented students with potential to succeed in advanced courses. Once students are identified as high-potential, schools must communicate the benefits of participation in these programs to students and their families. This is especially important for students from underrepresented groups who may be otherwise unaware of the programs available. Districts use a variety of strategies to engage underrepresented groups in these discussions, such as sending information home in multiple languages, providing transportation and food for evening information sessions, and following up with families who are unable to attend information sessions. ■

What School Boards Can Do

According to the Panasonic Foundation school boards that lead for equity...

1. Adopt, support and implement an equity-based vision, mission, system goals and policies to provide a framework for the work of school district staff;
2. Maintain effective communications and relationship with the superintendent and hold the superintendent responsible for student achievement;
3. Demonstrate leadership, courage and the will to govern the district on behalf of the entire community;
4. Allocate resources equitably to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and succeed academically and socially;
5. Educate and engage the community to create a sense of system- and community-urgency to aggressively do “whatever it takes” for every student to achieve success;
6. Enable all students in all classrooms to engage in mastering rigorous academic content;
7. Act to hold the school board and all adults accountable for the improvement of student outcomes based on multiple and varied measures;
8. Monitor system performance of all students to assess, report and communicate the academic performance of all students;
9. Ensure that every student is taught by a high-quality teacher and that every school is led by a high-quality principal;
10. Strategically engage students, families, communities, residents, businesses, elected and appointed municipal officials, community-based organizations and others to increase the effectiveness of collaborative efforts to support the academic and social success of all students;
11. Establish clear board of education work plans that align with system improvement priorities, invest in their own development, reflect on their effectiveness throughout the calendar year and annually engage in a formal self-assessment; and
12. Model high standards of ethical practices both individually and as a full board.