



What Is Equity?

Leading for equity is no small task. It takes tremendous fortitude, stamina, courage, and skill to crack open new opportunities for our most vulnerable young people. On this contested ground competing viewpoints on equity have arisen.

Many educators resonate with the ideas of equity and social justice. Reasons may be personal or ideological, born of life experience, courses of study, profound awakenings, or all of the above. Whatever drew you toward equity, we want you to step back and think critically about your perspective. We also ask that you give yourself permission to refine the view you walked in with or even to adopt a new one.

One common viewpoint on equity is *colorblindness*. This view promotes the belief that while our society may have struggled with racial inequality in the past, we have transcended this history and adopted a new stance beyond difference, race and color. Generally, proponents of colorblindness cite successful people of color, notably President Obama, as evidence that “we’ve come a long way” since the battles of the Civil Rights era. In this day and age, everyone has opportunities; only some people choose to pursue them vigorously while others lack the drive to really achieve.

Colorblindness has found a strong cultural current as a counter-narrative to being a racist. People who identify with colorblindness often see it as positive and harmonious, commenting that “I don’t see color” or “I accept all students as people.” This view lends itself toward the notion of equal opportunities for all students, rather than differentiated opportunity based on social location and access. An offshoot of American individualism, the philosophy of colorblindness holds that people can direct their own fates without the need for attention to racial or other differences.

Views on Equity

Julian Weissglass, Professor Emeritus and Founder of the National Coalition for Equity in Education at UC Santa Barbara, has articulated five additional views on equity, which follow (Weissglass 2004):

1. **Equity means equality.** Proponents of this viewpoint claim that treating everyone the same is sufficient. This idea is appealing, but elusive in practice. What does it mean to treat everyone equally when there are wide disparities in the allocation of resources and classes with two (or twelve) different native languages or cultures? Is it possible, given the complexity and subtlety of human interaction, to treat everyone the same - to “not see color,” for example, as some educators claim? The research shows that even those of us who think we treat students equally may not do so in practice.
2. **Equity means access.** Most everyone would agree that all children should have access to a good education. In practice, people’s positions range from “if you are good in a subject you are allowed access to advanced courses” to “everyone should be required to take a college preparatory curriculum” to “schools must provide an innovative curriculum and social environment that enable all students to learn.” Without considerable elaboration, equity as access is too simplistic a concept to be useful.

3. **Equity means proportional outcomes.** The differential attrition rate is central to this viewpoint. Educators who focus on outcomes may or may not be aware of the complex social and psychological forces involved in teaching and learning and of the challenges in bringing about change. Although outcomes are the ultimate measure of the effectiveness of our efforts, progress on equity requires more than focusing on numbers.
4. **Equity means political change.** Some argue that schools participate in creating social and economic inequality, or that our economic system requires low achievement, so that there are enough workers to take low-paying jobs. Advocates of this view claim that equity in education requires political action to reform the political/economic system.
5. **Equity means social, psychological and institutional change.** Equity means social, psychological, and institutional change. From this point of view, peoples' beliefs, prejudices, values, and biases must be meaningfully addressed in order to eliminate individual and institutional practices and policies that hinder students' ability to learn.

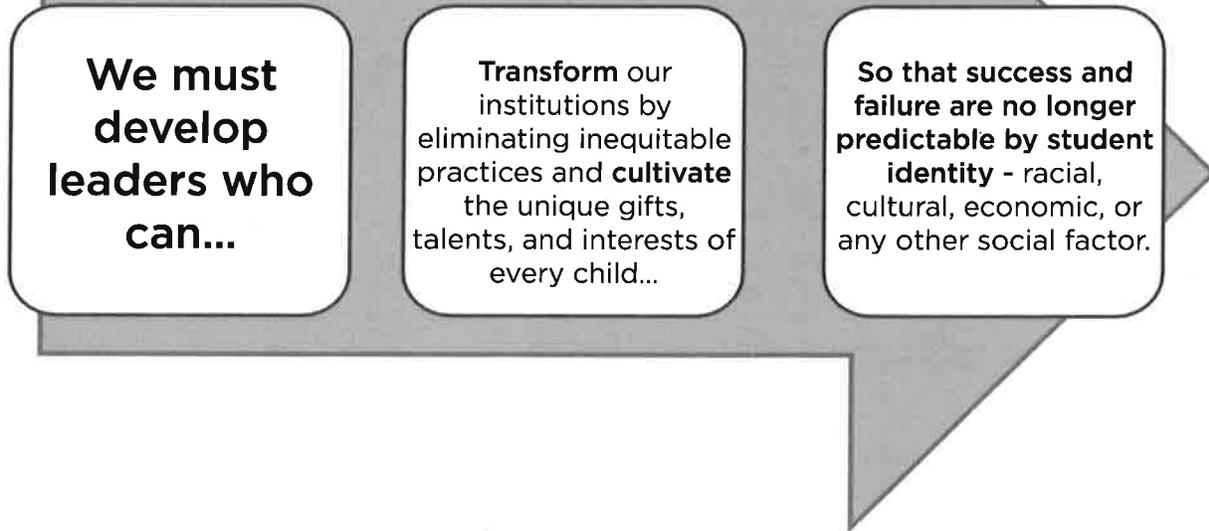
Which of these views squares with your current belief system? Which provoke you to think differently? Just as there are no silver bullets to dismantle inequity, there is no simple definition of equity.

What do we at the National Equity Project mean by equity?

At the National Equity Project, we have spent nearly two decades working in diverse school systems and organizations toward a vision of educational equity. Our definition has evolved over time through relationships with hundreds of leaders like you in dozens of contexts across the U.S. We've arrived at this basic notion:

Equity means that each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential.

To achieve equity in education



It may sound simple, but we all know there are formidable barriers to this reality. To achieve this vision requires the courageous leadership of people like you. This graphic represents our faith in the power of leaders to change the course of young people's lives.

Our definition is not neutral. It offers a direct counter-proposition to View 1 in Dr. Weissglass' excerpt - that "equity means equality". We believe that the historical and structural roots of inequity demand differentiated (different based on need) resources for children furthest from opportunity. To "level the playing field", we cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all instructional program, permit vast resource gaps between and within schools, or assume that given equal chances, all children will arrive at the same endpoint.

