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Educational Equity Principles and Practices During the Pandemic and Beyond

A Quick Guide for K–12 School and System Leaders

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Educational Equity Principles and Practices During the Pandemic and Beyond

Introduction

Today, our education system is being stretched like never before. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, K–12 systems have expanded digital learning, introducing this and other innovations that are likely to transform schools beyond the pandemic. This potential paradigm shift may redefine student needs and expectations, and presents both opportunities and challenges for ensuring educational equity in the future. We believe education systems have a renewed opportunity to adjust policies and practices to identify and respond to individual student needs both systemically and for each learner.

While a shared experience in name, COVID-19 has in fact further exposed and exacerbated disparities in our society and our education system. Inequities exist across communities and schools and often correlate with a student's race, socioeconomic status, language, location, and physical or learning exceptionalities, for example. These inequities manifest from the lack of awareness and attention as well as from biases (intentional or otherwise) that fail to recognize the realities— and address the needs—of various demographic groups. The results are too often educational practices that fall short of meeting student individual or cohort needs.

For over 20 years, D2L has worked to transform the way the world learns, with the belief that all learners should have access to the best possible learning opportunities and experiences. Our goal with this guide is to offer insights and suggestions to K–12 system and school leaders for how we might further address educational equity challenges in light of the rapidly changing education environment and technology-enabled instructional models.

This guide builds upon our previous discussion paper, "**Education Equity, the Digital Divide and COVID-19,**" which we published to support K–12 stakeholders interested in identifying and addressing technology and learning challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. In it, we explored how technology disparities have been shown to be fundamental for educational access and success for students and families.

In this guide, we explore the following question: How can K–12 systems be intentional in improving educational equity and supporting each student along the full spectrum of his or her learning and life journey as schooling models evolve? This guide:

- Outlines several principles and a sample of categorized practices **(see Appendix)** that K–12 systems can refer to for identifying where and how to support educational equity;

- Focuses on curriculum and instruction in the digital age (though not exclusively); and

- Targets K–12 system and school leaders at an organizational level.

Principles of Educational Equity

From food security to technology access to course availability, many students face tremendous challenges in their access to opportunities to learn and succeed. These were further highlighted and aggravated by the pandemic and the overall magnitude of lost instructional opportunity, social-emotional distress, and potential lifelong economic loss.

School and community leaders have responded to COVID-19 in a very personal and profound manner. Educators have visited their students, bus drivers have delivered meals, and corporations have donated technology and connectivity. Teachers have altered their curriculum and instruction, attempting to reach all students in their time, place, and pace of learning, and through delivery of individualized instruction, customized learning modules, and flexible assessment of learning.

How can such practices be sustained and expanded, both systemically and for each individual student, to increase equity during and beyond the pandemic?

While this is not a comprehensive list, we can consider the following four principles in building for equity. These overarching considerations help frame the equity conversation and provide a lens through which to think about steps forward.

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Equity ≠ Same:

Needs vary widely across students and families, and across communities. Equity is not served simply by providing the same solution for every student and family. Equality is not the same as equity. Some students may have food security but not Internet connectivity. Some students may have strong family guidance and care, but not family literacy. The path forward to equity is about ensuring each learner has the supports needed to meet their individual needs. That goes for their learning enablement (e.g., food, technology) as well as their learning pathway (e.g., curriculum, counseling, pace, and place).

Student Voice and Agency:

Student and family needs and preferences for educational success are often not well defined or understood, but the opportunity exists for schools to further identify and serve those requests and requirements. Many districts during the pandemic have solicited student and family input to a greater degree than ever before. They have continuously solicited (and responded accordingly to) their comfort and interest in a return to school, their wellness and learning access challenges, and their learning modality preference. Giving agency to students and families now and as we move into the future is necessary to improve engagement and equity.

Equity Requires System Resilience:

The pandemic has demonstrated that even the most high-quality, equitable K–12 school systems can fall short of serving all students during periods of significant disruption. Building school resilience is therefore critical to student equity—to serve all students in the face of repeated disruptions, from a pandemic to a shifting economy to prolonged weather events. Equity is not possible without resilience—without practices in place that anticipate, mitigate against, and serve the dynamic needs of all students despite an evolving but ongoing set of disruptions to routine school services. These practices can also serve students well during times of non-disruption.

Diversity and Inclusion:

Identifying certain race, gender, disability, and other biases soft-coded into the way K-12 education schools operate is critical. These biases can range from what is expected of students to how the curriculum is selected, taught, and assessed. As a result, many students are not included or sufficiently supported. In addition, many students do not see themselves and their experiences reflected in their curriculum content, whether in the representation of people or in the relevancy or accuracy of historical or cultural references. Equity requires empathy—recognition of inherent bias as well as intentional efforts to diversify curriculum and assessment and to modify interventions and predictive algorithms, both human and computer-based.
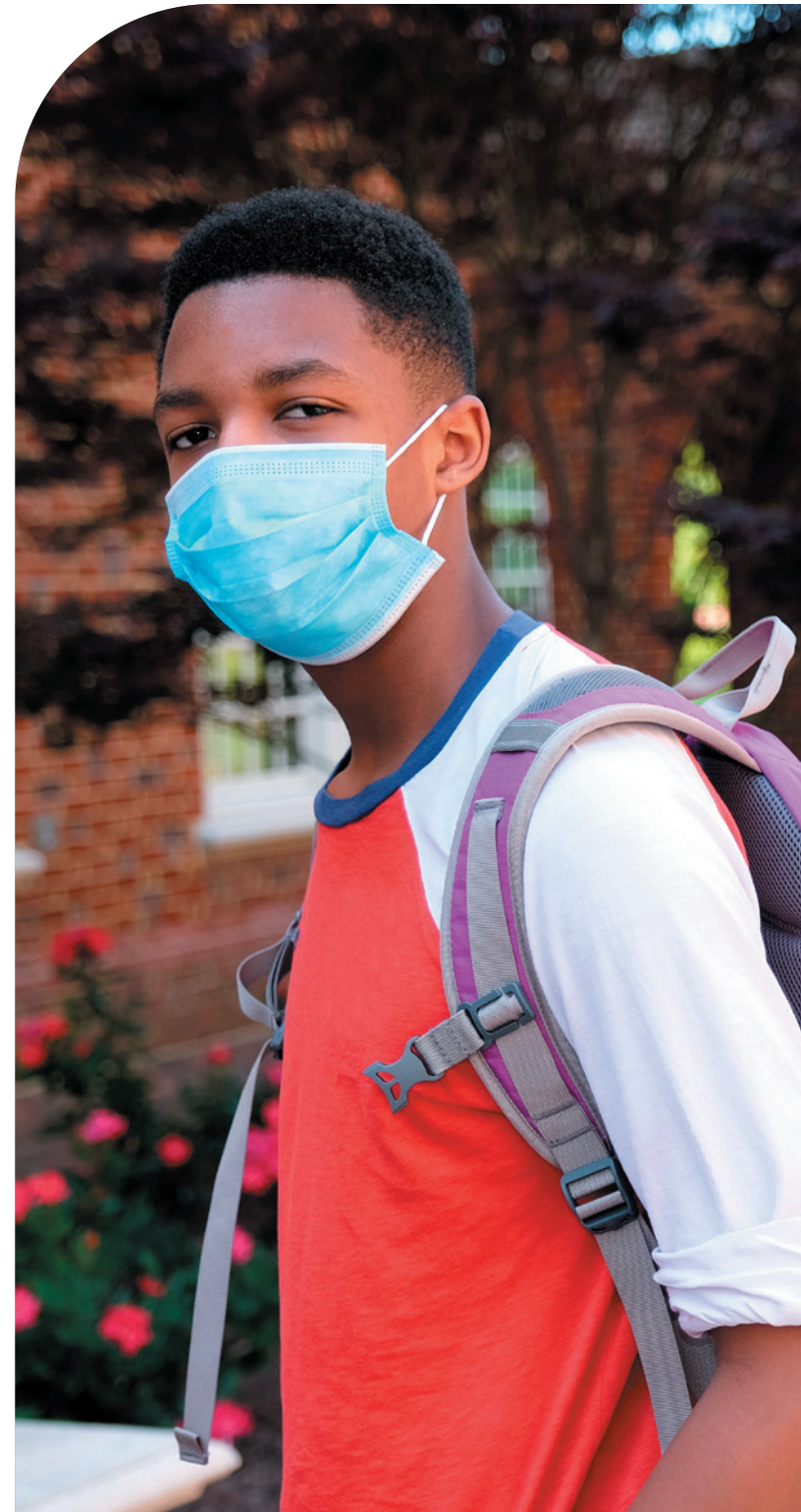
Best Practice Framework for Equity in Education

We outline a framework below for K–12 system and school leaders to use to help identify and address inequities. Significant disparities exist for students related to their race, socioeconomic status, language, location, and physical or learning exceptionalities, for example. These disparities often exist across their school experience, including attendance and absenteeism, digital learning access and success, discipline and suspension, test performance and achievement, graduation rates, college-going rates, and more.

This framework includes:

- Functional areas for educational equity; and

- Mechanisms for educational equity.

This framework of functions and mechanisms is not comprehensive in explicitly addressing all of these issues, but is especially focused on many challenges further highlighted during the pandemic. With the above-noted four principles of equity under consideration, we can identify many policies and practices to address disparities across these several functional areas and mechanisms.

Functional Areas for Educational Equity

Educational equity can only be adequately addressed when viewed holistically across a range of functional areas, including the following:

1. **Technology:** What tools and resources do students need for their educational access and success? Examples include an Internet-connected device and anytime, anywhere access to a robust learning platform with differentiated course content and supports, and assistive technology for accessibility.

2. **Curriculum and Instruction:** How can the teaching and learning process be engaging, inclusive, and flexible to meet students where they are while driving high standards? Examples include universally designed, inclusive, and scaffolded learning materials across multiple formats.

3. **Student Services and Wellness:** Do students have the 360-degree support needed for their physical, social-emotional, and graduation-readiness success? Examples include counseling, a safe learning environment, and food security.

Mechanisms for Educational Equity

Educational equity in each of these functional areas can only be adequately addressed by looking across a full range of tools, including the following:

1. **Access and Opportunity:** Do all students have access to quality curriculum and instruction, which increasingly (during and after the pandemic) requires access to the digital classroom door? Examples include quality teaching, technology connectivity, a digital learning platform, early college access, a robust curriculum that includes the arts and STEM, and safe and timely transportation to school.

2. **Accommodations:** What adjustments are needed to remove barriers and enable a student's ability to translate educational access into a true opportunity to learn? Examples include accessibility and universal design for students with disabilities, translation for non-English speaking students and families, and tools for students reading below grade level to build the foundational skills.

3. **Supports:** What aids and assistance do students need to be successful at school educationally, physically, and emotionally? Examples include food and medical assistance, counseling, and educational interventions, including personalized pathways.

Framework for Equity in Education: Sample Best Practices (See Appendix for All Practices)

	Technology	Curriculum and Instruction	Student Services and Wellness
Access	Learning Management Platform	Universal Design	Food Security
Accommodations	Assistive Technology	Asynchronous Learning	Teacher Diversity
Support	Parent Help Desk	Differentiated Content	Counseling

Equity Best Practices for Teaching and Learning

Teachers have long leaned into the goal of ensuring all students succeed. To do so, it is important that our systems and policies support educators by recognizing that the pathways and supports for each student must vary to meet his or her unique needs. Equity of learning opportunity and outcomes demands individualized treatment, whereby interventions are determined according to evolving individual needs, not by a single instructional formula.

Systemic requirements for success include:

- Belief that all students are capable of learning and success
- Equitable funding and resources, including access to effective and supported teachers
- Equitable, inclusive, and high-quality instructional and curricular resources
- Team response across the child's full educational and wellness needs, and across social service agencies
- Professional development for educators to better identify and address each student's learning needs
- Executive leadership in support of equity as a priority

Instructionally, this means a more personalized approach for students regarding when and how they learn through these and other practices:

- Flexible instructional approach, including flexible instructional hours, asynchronous supports, experiential learning, and early college and dual enrollment access
- More engaging and relevant curriculum, including differentiated and scaffolded content pathways, inclusive content and tasks, and a curriculum that is more responsive to unique student disabilities and English language status, and in multiple modalities and formats
- Authentic and flexible assessment focused on student mastery, varied in time and form, more relevant to student experiences, and providing multiple means to demonstrate mastery
- Enhanced use of technology as a resilient, engaging, and anytime/anywhere platform for teaching and learning, including robust learning content and community

The **appendix** includes a matrix list of practices organized by mechanism and functional area across the four principles. This list is comprehensive within these domains, but it is not intended to be complete either within those areas or in identifying all facets of a K–12 system of equity.

Instead, this Quick Guide is intended to provide a scan of considerations and options that K–12 leaders, educators, and stakeholders can build upon through community dialogue and action.

Conclusion

Few of these concepts are new. It has long been recognized that students struggle to learn at school if they are not supported out of school, and that instruction must meet each student where they are in their learning. What is new is the increased recognition of these realities spotlighted by widespread student struggles caused by disruption to routines during the pandemic.

We now better understand that the path forward to educational equity requires:

- A responsiveness to each student's unique needs;

- A recognition that K–12 systems and solutions must be designed with "fail stops," given the need for resilience in the face of ongoing change and disruption;

- A recognition that all students are valued and empowered; and

- A further understanding of the importance of student and family feedback and flexibility in identifying what options are needed for their success.

Additionally, we understand these pillars also support the modernization of our education system to provide excellence for all students. Personalization for students with disabilities, for example, is also a principle and practice that will well serve all students.

Our opportunity and obligation now is to implement the systemic and operational changes needed to deliver on a reimagined and redefined promise of an excellent education for all students. Education transformation will persist, but we can take steps to ensure education inequities do not.

Appendix:
Best Practices for Equity in Education

Technology

Access	Need: Anytime, anywhere **Internet-connected device** for every student Solution: District purchase, corporate partnership, Wi-Fi hotspots, consortium purchasing	
	Need: **Learning management platform** for accessing course content, assignments, and community Solution: Access to a robust learning management system or related platform with accessible and differentiated learning resources and instructional supports	
Accommodations	Need: Curriculum and instructional access for students with disabilities Solution: Provide **assistive technology; follow accessibility standards**	
	Need: Family accessibility to school communications Solution: Provide **communications in multiple/accessible formats and languages**	
Support	Need: **Technology support** for students and families Solution: Parent-facing help line and support; student tech support squad	
	Need: **More convenient times for live student/family connection to teachers and counselors** Solution: Provide multiple communication times and methods, including virtual office hours, within-platform asynchronous chat, email/text/phone, recordings, discussion boards, and use of buddy system or other group supports	

Curriculum and Instruction

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Access	Need: **Robust curriculum and courses** equitably available to all students Solution: Provide all students with access to a wide range of courses, including AP/IB, arts, STEM, foreign language, CTE, etc., directly, online, or through partnership
	Need: Learning content and tasks that are not accessible or in a single modality Solution: Implement **universal design for learning (UDL) principles** providing multiple means and formats for representing content and enabling student expression
Accommodations	Need: **Less rigid methods to assess student knowledge** Solution: Flexible methods, including authentic and portfolio measures, scheduling options, competency-based models, and item form/type options
	Need: **Complement to synchronous-only instruction,** which is not accommodating to students' unique schedules Solution: Provide alternatives through flipped classrooms, asynchronous learning, robust digital and analog course content, recorded lessons, flexible teacher access, and peer learning opportunities
Support	Need: Instructional support targeted to student unique needs Solution: Provide **differentiation and multitiered support by varying modality and pace, scaffolding curriculum, and customizing instructional supports,** including deeper and authentic learning opportunities and instructional supports for struggling students
	Need: **Guidance for graduation and college/career readiness** Solution: Ongoing information and personalized guidance necessary to understand postsecondary opportunities, course requirements, and learning pathways
Other	Need: Curriculum that represents the diversity and experiences of the student population Solution: Be intentional **about inclusiveness and diversity in course content and assignments,** including through selection criteria, reviews, and audits
	Need: Quality instruction for all students Solution: **Equitable distribution across classrooms and students of experienced, effective, and supported teachers,** including assigning experienced and effective teachers to close learning gaps

Student Services and Wellness

Access	Need: Student physical wellness Solution: Support **access to food, medical care, shelter, transportation to school, and other physical needs** directly and through coordination and partnerships with other agencies and nonprofits to ensure student wellness for educational access and success
	Need: **Increased student attendance and learning time,** and reduced chronic absenteeism Solution: Employ a dual strategy to both identify and address causes of absenteeism as well as provide extended/flexible delivery methods (scheduling, after-hours programs) and metrics (engagement, mastery instead of seat-time, portfolio measures)
Accommodations	Need: **Reduce discipline and suspensions** for students of color where these occur at higher rates than the averages Solution: Recognize and address causes of poor behavior as well as any systemic biases in discipline measures
	Need: Teachers that reflect the demographic groups (gender, color, disability level) of their students Solution: Increase recruitment and support for a **diversity of teacher backgrounds and demographics**
Support	Need: Student isolation, depression, and negative view of self are barriers to wellness and learning Solution: **Be intentional about social-emotional learning (SEL)** to recognize and address students' mindset, need for resilience and self-efficacy, and importance of inclusiveness and relationships
	Need: Student psychological, emotional, family, and life readiness supports Solution: Provide a multitiered **suite of personalized guidance and counseling support services,** both directly and through partnerships and coordination with other agencies and nonprofits

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About D2L

D2L has a personal stake in educational equity. For over 20 years, D2L has worked to transform the way the world learns, with the belief that all learners should have access to the best possible learning opportunities and experiences.

D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is a leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It's easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver real results. Brightspace is used by learners in K–12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000. Learn more about D2L for schools, higher education, and businesses at **D2L.com.**

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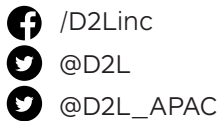
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