

# EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?  
HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN WE REACH IT?

## EQUALITY v EQUITY

**Equality** in education is achieved when students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources.

**Equity** is achieved when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school.



## RESEARCH BRIEF

It's been over 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.

In this paper, CPE provides a brief overview of educational equity and its various, sometimes overlapping parts. We begin by reviewing the data on the students served by our public schools. We then describe the areas in an equity agenda that research shows will have the greatest impact on student outcomes: funding, curriculum, teachers and discipline policies. Our hope is to provide a common vocabulary for school boards to help them start conversations in their communities and thereby bring the nation closer to fulfilling its promise of equal opportunity for all.

### THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION ON EQUITY

**Public schools should provide equitable access and ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills to succeed as contributing members of a rapidly changing, global society, regardless of factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or disability.**

— NSBA Beliefs and Policies

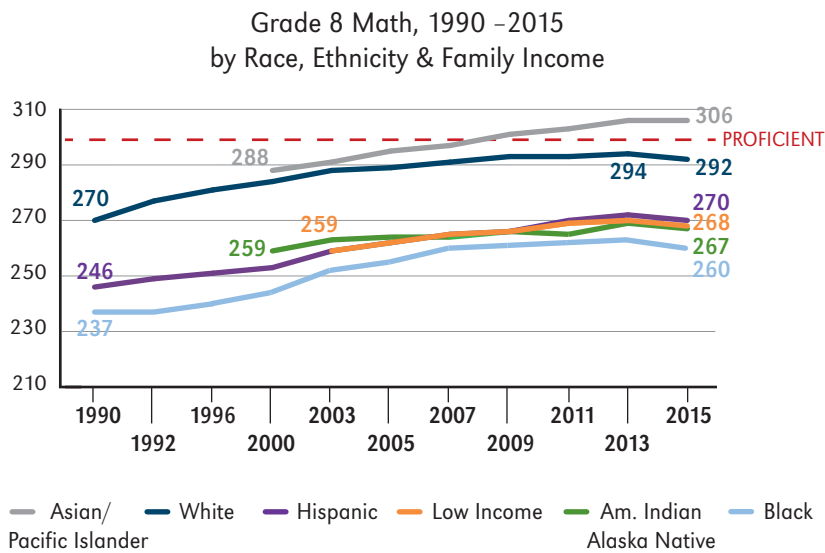
### WHERE WE ARE

**A changing student population:** The U.S. is a much more diverse nation than it was around the time of the Brown decision. In 1960, 85 percent of the country was white. The largest minority group, African Americans, comprised 11 percent of the total population, and Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans represented less than 5 percent combined. Today the white population is about 63 percent of the total, and is expected to be less than half by the year 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2012). The demographic shift is most evident in our public schools where children of color are already the majority in the western and southern regions of the U.S. (NCES, 2015).

Childhood poverty has also increased. In 2000, 17 percent of the under 18 population lived in families below the poverty level. Today that percentage is 22 percent (Kids Count, 2015). In addition, the percent of English language learners in our schools increased over the last decade from 8 percent in 2001 to the current 10 percent (NCES, 2012).

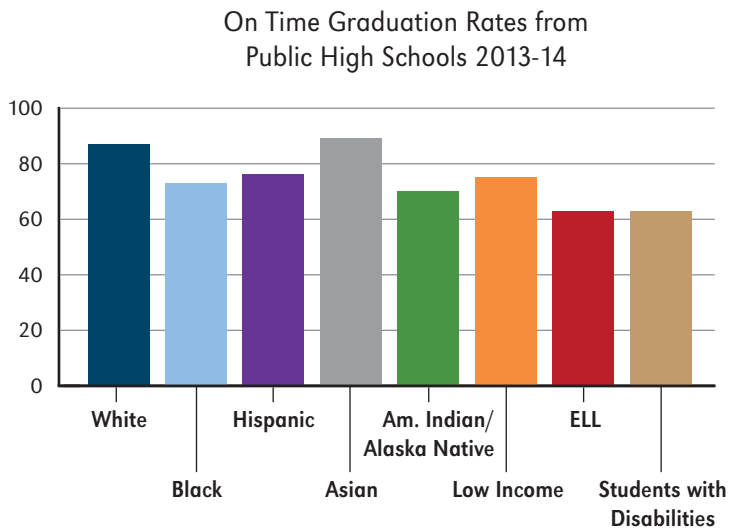
## EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN WE REACH IT?

**CHART 1: Achievement gaps between student groups have narrowed slightly but still remain wide.**



SOURCE: NCES, 2015

**CHART 2: All time high graduation rates still show gaps.**



SOURCE: NCES, 2014

Distressingly, after decades of progress in integrating schools, we have begun to witness their re-segregation by race and poverty. Gary Orfield and his team at UCLA's Civil Rights Project report that:

- Three-quarters of black and Latino students attend majority-minority schools; about two in five are in schools where the white population is less than 10 percent.
- The typical white student attends a school that is three quarters white.
- Minority students are also subject to “double segregation” by race and poverty.

The typical black student, for example, attends a school with a two-thirds poverty rate (Civil Rights Project, 2012).

**Achievement gaps:** Public schools have been steadily improving the performance of all student groups, most notably in math achievement and high school graduation, yet gaps remain. (See Charts 1 and 2)

In the U.S. today, our poorest students are nearly four times as likely to fail in math than their wealthiest peers (OECD, 2008). If we are to close the achievement gap completely, we must address current inequities in funding, access to high-level curriculum, access to good teachers, and how school discipline is imposed.

### FUNDING

Money is the clearest indicator of educational equity between districts. The

largest share of school revenue comes from state and local dollars. Combined, they support about 90 percent of the total budget. How these dollars are distributed within states can manifest in sizable revenue gaps between districts based on the poverty rates of the students they serve.

The Education Trust reports that in 2012, the poorest districts in the nation – those in the bottom quartile – received \$1,200 less per pupil than the wealthiest, top quartile districts. The national figure conceals large differences by state. The poorest districts in six states received at least 5 percent less than their wealthy counterparts; in one state, Illinois, they received nearly 20 percent less. However, the opposite pattern was seen in 17 states where the poorest districts actually receive at least 5 percent *more* per pupil dollars compared to those with lowest poverty rates; poor districts in Ohio, Minnesota and South Dakota received about 20 percent more.

Note that funding inequities may be understated. Most experts agree that an equitable distribution of education dollars would take into account the extra costs involved in districts with high proportions of low-income students or students with special needs such as disabilities or English language learners (Augenblick et al, 1997). “Weighted funding formulas” count pupils based on need in order to achieve equity. The federal Title 1 formula, for example, is based on a calculation that assumes educating students in poverty costs 40 percent more than the basic per pupil allocation.

The Education Trust repeated its analysis of funding inequity using Title 1’s \$1.40 to \$1.00 formula. When adjusting for the additional needs of low-income students, the analysts found that the gaps were, not surprisingly, wider than when comparing dollar to dollar. In high-poverty districts, per pupil revenues were \$2,200 less overall than in low-poverty districts. Moreover, the number of states in which poor districts received at least 5 percent less than the wealthiest districts increased to 22 from six when looking at unweighted dollars, showing that many states still have a long way to go to close the funding gap (Education Trust, 2015).

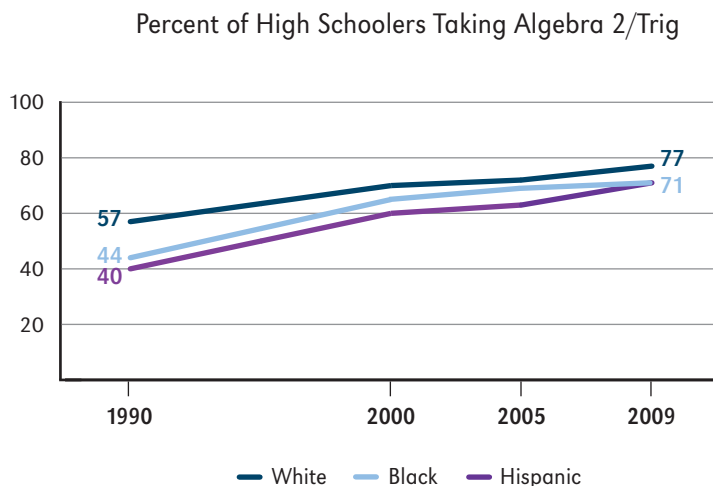
### HIGH-LEVEL CURRICULUM

It goes without saying that students are not likely to learn subject matter they are not

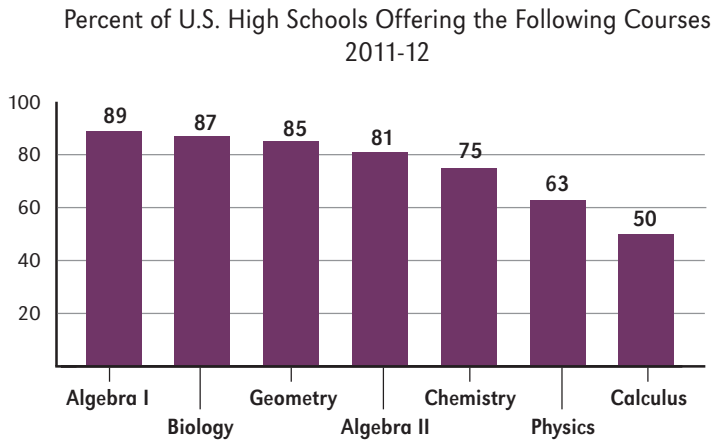
taught. Achieving educational equity, therefore, demands more than distributing funds more fairly. We must also guarantee that students have equal access to high-level curriculum.

This is actually one area where American schools have been making good gains. In 1990, only half of U.S. students had the benefit of Algebra II and Trigonometry and gaps based on race were wide: 57 percent of white high schoolers had taken these courses, compared to 44 percent of black and 40 percent of Hispanic students. By 2009, however, not only were these high-level math courses being taken by three-quarters of our students, the racial gaps had nearly closed. (Chart 3)

**CHART 3: Today’s students have greater access to high-level math than ever before and gaps between student groups have narrowed considerably.**



SOURCE: NCES, 2011

**CHART 4: Not all high schools provide high-level math and science courses.**

SOURCE: OCR, 2014

Nonetheless, data from the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education shows that we still have schools that are not providing courses students need to succeed after high school. In 2012, 19 percent of high schools did not offer Algebra II and a stunning 11 percent could not even provide Algebra I. Access to lab sciences is even worse: 25 percent of our high schools did not offer chemistry and 37 percent did not have physics courses (Chart 4). Schools serving high proportions of students of color were the most likely to fall in this category (OCR, 2014).

Access to high-level curriculum needs to start long before high school, of course. School districts need to make sure

elementary and middle-schools provide a curriculum to all students that places them on track to graduate college- and career-ready. High-quality pre-kindergarten needs to be part of the mix, too. Good early education is especially beneficial to children from low-income or non-English speaking families by helping them start school with the same skills as their classmates from more advantaged circumstances (CPE, 2008).

**GOOD TEACHERS**

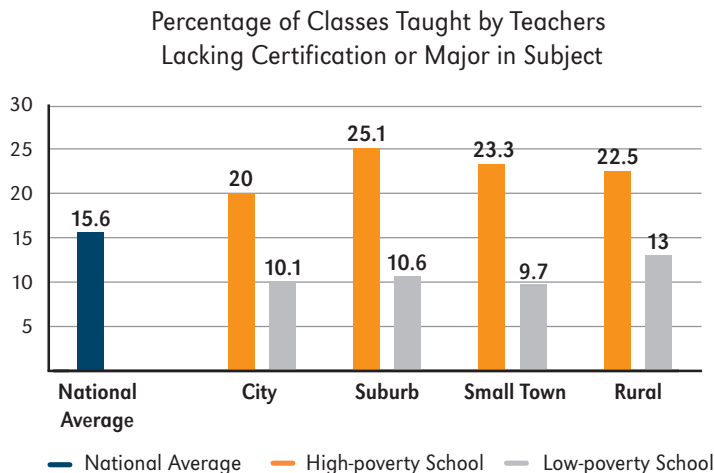
Teachers have more influence on student learning than any other school factor (CPE, 2009). Moreover, the impact of high-performing teachers has been shown to be similar regardless of school characteristics, making teacher quality a major element in equity plans (Reform Support Network, 2015).

There is no single way to define teacher quality. Experience, credentials and academic background have all been shown to have an effect on student learning in varying degrees. In addition, new “growth” or “value-added” measures have been developed to relate student gains to individual teachers. In truth, all of these indicators matter.

By some measures, the qualifications of the nation’s teaching force have been improving in recent years. For example, new teachers are stronger academically than their counterparts 20 years ago based on SAT scores and number of Master’s Degrees (Goldhaber & Walch, 2014). Yet we still are not fully able to grant all students fair access to qualified teachers. Whether quality is defined as certification, subject knowledge or impact, poor students and children of color are less likely to be taught by well qualified teachers than their peers. (See Chart 5 on the next page)

In high-poverty (over 50%) high schools, for example, 52.4 percent of teachers were fully certified compared to 61.1 percent elsewhere. In addition, fewer new teachers in poor

**CHART 5: High-poverty high schools are most likely to have classes taught by teachers out of their field.**



SOURCE: Education Trust, 2010. 2007-08 data.

schools had any practical teaching experience as part of their training prior to taking charge of their classrooms: 39.3 percent had student teaching credits compared to 51.1 percent in wealthier schools. Similar gaps are present in schools based on the enrollment of students of color (NCES, 2012).

“Effective teachers” – that is, teachers whose impact on student learning is above the average – also tend to disproportionately serve in wealthier schools. In one southern state, highly effective teachers comprised 15 percent of the staff in high-poverty, high-minority schools, but were 20 percent in low-poverty, low-minority schools (Reform Support Network, 2015).

In July 2014, the U.S. Department of Education announced its Excellent Educators for All Initiative in order to help assure students have equal access to good teachers. The three part initiative includes the development of state Comprehensive Educator Equity Plans that will “put in place locally-developed solutions to ensure every student has effective educators” as required under Title 1 of the Elementary Secondary Education Act. State equity plans were submitted to the Department in June 2015 and, as of this writing, 42 have been approved.

**DISCIPLINE**

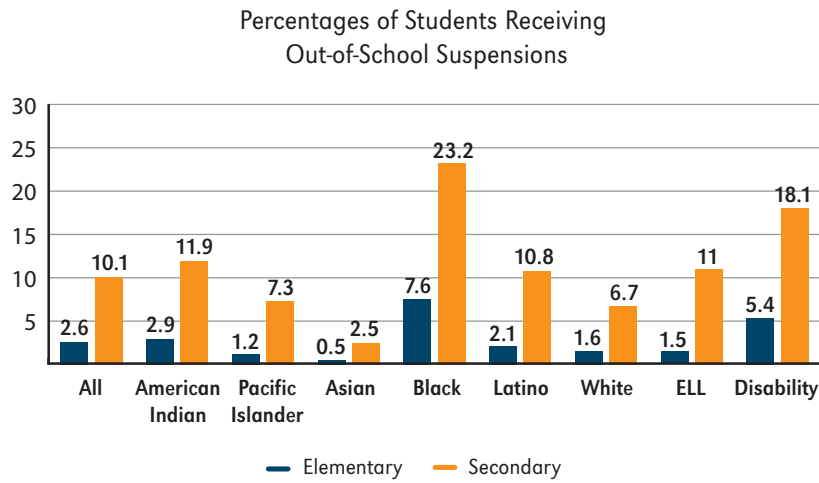
We’ve established that in order for students to be successful, they need access to well-funded schools, high-level curriculum and qualified teachers. They also need to actually be in school to get the benefit of these resources. An analysis of NAEP scores, for example, showed that eighth-graders who were absent three or more days in the past month were significantly outscored by their classmates who were present every day: 60 percent of students with absences scored at the basic level or better compared to 78 percent of those with none (NCES, 2009).

Absenteeism has many causes, but discipline policies that make heavy use of out-of-school suspensions are among them and can place students at risk of academic failure. In addition, students with multiple suspensions have a higher likelihood of dropping out, and can even lead to worse outcomes – substance abuse and delinquency in the community (Losen et al., 2015).

Such policies can produce a harmful school climate for students overall. But they also have a disproportionate effect on students of color and students with disabilities (See Chart 6 on the next page).



**CHART 6: Suspension rates by student group show gaps, 2011-12.**



SOURCE: the Civil Rights Project, 2015

According to NSBA’s policy guide on out-of-school suspensions, “African American, Latino and Native American students, in particular, are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested than their white peers, even when accused of similar behavior” (NSBA, 2013).

An in-depth study of discipline in Texas schools examined referral rates of students by race between seventh and twelfth grades (Chart 7). The researchers discovered that black students were far more likely than their white or Hispanic classmates to be given an out-of-school suspension for a first disciplinary referral. This finding calls into question any suggestion that students of color are suspended more often because they are breaking more rules than white students. At the very least, it should prompt school leaders to look more closely at their policies and the students they affect.

**TOWARD AN EQUITABLE SYSTEM FOR ALL STUDENTS**

The equity issues addressed in this brief – funding, high-level curriculum, good teachers, and discipline policies – by no means represent an exhaustive list. Unmentioned but also important resources for assuring equity include

**CHART 7: Black students are disproportionately represented in out-of-school suspensions for first referrals.**

	Percent referred for disciplinary action	Percent of these whose 1st referral was for a code of conduct violation	Percent of 1st referrals resulting in out-of-school suspension
Black	75.1	94.2	26.2
White	64.8	92.7	18.0
Hispanic	46.9	93.3	9.9

SOURCE: Fabelo et al, Breaking Schools’ Rules, The Council of State Governments/ Public Policy Research Institute, July 2011

extra academic supports for low-performing students; access to technology both in school and at home; comprehensive family services; mentorships and trained counselors, and more. Nonetheless we have attempted to present those elements of education that research shows have the most impact on student learning and therefore deserve close attention when developing equity plans.

School leaders who want to make sure their schools are equitable should first look at their data:

- What is our performance by school and by student group?
- Do all schools have adequate funding? Do funds flow to schools according to need?

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- Do we provide high-level curriculum in all of our schools? Do our high schools offer course sequences in high-level math from Algebra I to calculus, and science from biology to physics? Do we offer AP courses and is access open to all? Do we provide extra supports to struggling students and have policies in place to make sure they get the benefit of these supports?
- What are the qualifications of our teaching staff? Is teacher quality distributed equitably among schools as well as within the school building? Do all student groups have fair access to the best teachers? Are teachers well-supported? Do we reward teachers who serve the neediest students?
- How do our overall discipline rates compare to other districts? Do we suspend students more often than others? Are discipline rates similar for all student groups? Do we have enough school counselors and trained mentors to support students and work in partnership with families?
- Finally, do we monitor our progress? Do we make adjustments when needed? Are all of our students learning, engaged and on track to graduate college- and career-ready?

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### LEARN MORE FROM NSBA:



Achieving Excellence for All: A guide to diversity-related policy strategies for school districts, 2011

Amicus Briefs: Whether the Fifth Circuit's re-endorsement of the University of Texas at Austin's use of racial preferences in undergraduate admissions decisions can be sustained under this Court's decisions interpreting the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, including *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 133 S. Ct. 2411 (2013)

Partnerships not Pushouts: A guide for school board members: Community Partnerships for Student Success, April 2014

National School Boards Association, Addressing the Out-of-School Suspension Crisis: A policy guide for school board members, 2013



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