



LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

EQUITY IS A STANDARD OF PRACTICE

The practice of equity in education isn't new, but the application of the word equity is still in its infancy. Even though I was always an equitable practitioner, I had no word to apply to what I was doing as a teacher and as a principal, which was meeting my students where they were and as they were. I watched the word equity take off like a rocket beginning around 2012. From there, I watched it soar to the extent that it's probably the No. 1 topic in education conversations today.

This increased emphasis on equity is a good thing, but it is also polarizing. Some districts, schools, and educators, as well as legislators, want no part of it. I have had a small number of consulting clients request that I not mention the word equity in a six-hour session because they feared it would trigger backlash from some of the staff. That's a difficult ask for me because equity is at the core of who I am as an educator and who I have been since I walked into my first classroom in 1988 — you could say that I “bleed” equity. Moreover, equity is the center point of my consulting work, and clients know this when they invite me to work with them. Yet some of them are still afraid to say the “e” word.

By naming equity in three of the 11 revised Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Forward is encouraging educators everywhere to have bold and brave conversations about how to achieve equity. There is no more important conversation to be had in schools today, and there is no better way to have productive conversations than high-quality professional learning.

As educators embark on this learning and these conversations, one of the greatest challenges we face is that there is no universal definition of equity. Readings, conference presentations, and research offer voluminous perspectives and opinions — so many that I often find my head spinning. In 2021, I wrote *The Equity & Social Justice Education 50*, which offers 50 questions on equity and social justice for educators to reflect on and discuss, with the intent of defining equity and offering strategies to achieve it. I am currently working on developing equity standards for educators to correspond with the definition.

I define equity as I indicated above: *meeting young people where they are and as they are*. However students arrive when they show up at school in the morning — even if it is not how we would hope — it is our responsibility as educators to meet each student right where they are academically, socially, and emotionally.

One of the reasons I use this definition is that it is also a standard of practice. Equity must always be looked upon as a strategy and never the end goal. If equity is the goal, the school is in trouble. Instead, equity is the vehicle or strategy to get every student to success in the classroom and beyond.



Baruti Kafele will be a keynote speaker on Wednesday, Dec. 7, at Learning Forward's Annual Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. For more information, visit [conference.learningforward.org](https://www.learningforward.org).

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It takes a lot of work for educators to be able to meet all students where they are and as they are. That’s where professional learning comes in, and the equity standards in Standards for Professional Learning provide helpful guidance. The Equity Practices standard articulates the importance of embracing students’ assets and honoring their identities.

As a practitioner of, and a student of, equity for over 30 years, I have devised what I refer to as three equity nonnegotiables — aspects of equity that must be embraced and addressed if we are to be equity-minded educators: student individuality, student cultural identity, and student voice. I ask educators to reflect on whether and how they are addressing these nonnegotiables.

Student individuality: Visible or invisible? What is it in my role as an equity-mindset teacher that ensures

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the *individuality* of each of my learners (academically, socially and emotionally) is acknowledged, appreciated, respected, and *visible*?

Student cultural identity: Accentuated or denied? What is it in my role as an equity-mindset teacher that ensures the *cultural / racial identity* of each of my learners is acknowledged, appreciated, respected and *accentuated*?

Student voice: Distinct or obscure? What is it in my role as an equity-mindset teacher that ensures the *voice* of each of my learners is acknowledged, appreciated, respected, and *distinct*?

Using these nonnegotiables, school

leaders can establish expectations for all teachers to create a universal approach to equity across grade levels and content areas. They can also design professional learning around those expectations. This intentionality and coherence is key to each student having an equitable opportunity for success regardless of the specific classroom and teacher in charge. When leaders set the expectations and vision for equity, and professional learning follows the equity standards as well as the other Standards for Professional Learning, all teachers can give all children the opportunities they deserve. ■

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helps you grow more than you could have on your own. When you see the group as a value-add in your life and work, you learn from and with your colleagues on multiple levels, and, in the end, you are better for being a part of the team.

Second is understanding that “I” influences “we.” The old adage often repeated in schools is that there is no “I” in team. That’s a myth. Individuals matter. We all are shaped by those who surround us, and the collective needs to hear many perspectives. When we recognize and value each teammate’s stories, gifts, and diverse ways of seeing the world, it contributes greatly to the fabric of the collective, the learning of its members, and the shared future of a school.

As Stewart Levine writes in

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The Book of Agreement: 10 Essential Elements for Getting the Results You Want, “Because all of us are smarter than any one of us, we have come to recognize that the only way we can stay successful is to learn from and teach each other. . . . Our bottom-line goal is to get people to think beyond their own territoriality, to share, and to respect what others have to contribute” (Levine, 2002).

Ultimately, learning from one another makes us better able to serve students. When we follow the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard, we focus on student learning *while* working

on growing our own collaboration skills. It isn’t an either/or but rather a both/and moment.

We are building the skills of collaborative inquiry in the service of better teaching and more student learning.

REFERENCES

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