



DIVERSITY AND EQUITY

9 Ways to Enable Equitable Education in Your School

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By Carl Hooker Aug 15, 2022



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The struggle for equity in education stretches back beyond our nation's living memory. But, as the COVID-19 pandemic has made painfully clear, we've still got plenty of work to do.

In a [recent discussion with global education leaders](#), we took a hard look at some of the inequitable practices that continue to plague our schools. The conversation was refreshing, raw and relevant to the current situation in our public institutions, highlighting major issues that may not have been considered previously.



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Below are nine key themes that emerged from our panel, along with a few action items to help education leaders enable equitable education in their schools or districts.

1. Addressing the digital divide requires a human-centered approach

In the early days of the pandemic, schools raced to provide devices and hotspots to students, responding to concerns over a widening digital divide. We must not let the flood of tech tools overshadow the necessary human element of education. Paige Johnson, vice president of education marketing at [Microsoft](#), reminds us that we need to continue thinking about how to help all teachers leverage the technology that they and their students have received over the past few years.

Schools and districts have prepared action plans, strategies and vision statements around how they can make technology more accessible to all students. While this is essential, Kyle Zimmer, founder of First Book, points out that teachers must be directly involved in this conversation: “We need the voice of the educators front and center.” Classroom teachers are best positioned to identify where the main issues are and where schools should focus their attention.

2. Technology used with intention can promote equitable learning

As we strive to shrink the digital divide, we must also examine how we are using learning technology. A tool like [Microsoft’s Immersive Reader](#)—built into many education products, such as Teams, Word and Minecraft Education Edition—can be such a powerful way for a student with dyslexia, for example, to feel connected and take part in classroom conversations.

Technology can also give teachers more time to focus on the individual interests and needs of students, to truly personalize instruction. Applications that quickly aggregate data—making it digestible and actionable for teachers—are the first step in that personalized journey. For example, [Microsoft’s Reading Progress](#) tool works to increase reading fluency through individualized assignments for learners, while generating insights on correct words-per-minute, accuracy rates, challenging words and patterns of expression, all of which may inform instruction.

3. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't advance equity

Dr. Adam Phyll, director of technology and media services for Newton County Schools in Georgia, offers a great analogy to help us think critically about equity in the classroom: Of his three children, one requires eyeglasses and another, hearing aids. Logically, he has bought one pair of glasses and one pair of hearing aids to address these specific needs, rather than distribute three of each item across the family, in case an unidentified concern arises.

Providing the exact same tool to every student in a school, regardless of their circumstances, does not advance equity; nor is this an effective use of resources. True educational equity demands that we give each student access to the tools and technologies that they require individually to become successful learners.

4. We need to measure the effectiveness of our learning technology

At the start of the pandemic, a smorgasbord of tools was dropped on teachers and schools to help with remote or hybrid learning. Many of these were not vetted or piloted to determine their instructional value.

Phyll cautions that schools need to evaluate the tools they are using on a regular basis and determine their educational net worth: “We have all these tools that get thrown at people, and we spend a lot of money on them. But then we don't use the very simple things [that help our kids].”

[Watch the full “Enabling Equitable Education” webinar on-demand now.](#)

5. Professional learning can power positive change

Recently, literacy scores across Mississippi saw a dramatic increase, moving the state from the very bottom of national standings to the middle of the pack. Greer Proctor-Dickson, managing director

at the Barksdale Reading Institute, acknowledges the role that technology and data played in this change. However, she attributes much of the success to an investment in human capital.

Through various state grants, she had the funds to build out a support structure and network that could help with both the technology element and the literacy work. “One big part of our success has been that we’ve built a model, a statewide model, of literacy coaching,” she explains. Relying on this network of coaches and their built-in relationships with schools across the state, her team quickly pivoted during the pandemic to provide strategies, training and mentoring—initiating a ripple effect of best practices for teachers and successful outcomes for students.

6. We must consider the whole child in every learner

When we look at our current, traditional model of education, it simply isn’t equitable. Providing direct, synchronous instruction on various subjects at certain times in the day doesn’t take into account the diverse learning needs of each student. Technology can play a key role in giving students an opportunity to leverage their interests through authentic projects and providing them a space to showcase their talents.

For Johnson, it’s been surprising that a flipped learning model hasn’t really taken off as much as it could have during the pandemic. Giving some students a space to learn online and at their own pace became a real possibility briefly but hasn’t carried over in many cases as students have resumed in-person learning. The rush to return to normal has seen us abandon some of the best methods for diversifying instructional delivery.

The unfortunate truth is that many students in marginalized settings were not well supported or successful when things were “normal” in pre-pandemic times. We must be careful not to fall back on patterns that dismiss the whole-child view of the learner.

7. Investing in the parent community is essential

We’ve all had our world turned upside down by the pandemic. But for many parents, the challenges have been nearly insurmountable. Their homes became de facto schools—and they became part-

time teachers and tech support reps—when their children began remote or hybrid learning with school-issued devices in early 2020.

Zimmer emphasizes the importance of creating a seamless pipeline of support for parents. That means dedicating time for parent training on best practices with devices at home. It also means being there to support them when a device malfunctions. Additionally, we need to listen to concerns and create feedback loops between school and home.

Prioritizing frictionless experiences for parents and guardians builds trust within the community, facilitates the integration of technology and promotes student success.

8. We can leverage technology to increase representation and support diverse interests

“Kids who see themselves in books become better readers. They are motivated,” observes Zimmer, commenting on the topic of diversity in library collections. We must consider this same effect when introducing technology into the learning environment.

We know that certain student groups don’t feel personally connected to many aspects of digital learning and technology. For example, female students traditionally show a sharp decrease in interest in coding by the time they get to middle school. Educators can work to overcome this by creating opportunities for girls to code at an early age. Similarly, they can provide more opportunities for students in traditionally underserved communities to engage with eSports and access other interests via technology.

9. It all comes down to relationships



Relationships are the ultimate key to an educational system that is equitable for all.

We are drowning in data. We are facing a time famine. Teachers are overwhelmed, and burnout is a real issue. Not every student receives an equitable experience in schools.

Technology is not a panacea, but it can help. It can highlight important learning data from the classroom and give teachers the means to act on those findings. It can create pathways to creative ideas based on students' unique interests and perspectives. And it can do a great deal to close identified gaps in student learning experiences.

However, we must not neglect the importance of interpersonal relationships—coaches mentoring teachers; administrators working side-by-side with parents; students being appreciated for who they are and supported through differences in learning needs. Investing in relationships improves opportunities for all learners.

Technology cannot replace human connections. Relationships are the ultimate key to an educational system that is equitable for all.

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