

Understanding Equity vs. Equality in Education

A Guide for Local School Boards
produced by the Virginia School Boards Association

The terms “equity” and “equality” are often used interchangeably, but they represent fundamentally different approaches to addressing the diverse needs of students in our schools. For school boards, understanding these differences is critical to fostering environments where all students can thrive.

Equality: Treating everyone the same

Equality is applying the same resources and funding regardless of student need, ensuring everyone receives the same resources. Equality assumes that all students start from the same place and have the same needs. In practice, equality often fails to address the disparities that exist within our student populations and across our school divisions.

For example:

Equality is when a school division in a community with ample resources receives the same state support as a division in a community with limited resources.

Equality assumes that all students learn with the same tools, such as identical technology or standardized instruction regardless of their individual learning styles or circumstances.

Equity: Meeting unique needs for success

Equity, on the other hand, is about fairness – providing each student what they need to succeed. It acknowledges that students have different starting points and barriers to overcome. Equity focuses on allocating resources and support based on those unique needs to ensure every student has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

For example:

Equity is rooted in state funding. The state pays a higher share of the SOQ formula estimate for school divisions in less wealthy localities and a lower share for divisions in wealthier localities.

Equity adapts teaching methods and materials to meet the diverse learning needs of students.

Equity is not a negative word

Unfortunately, the word “equity” is sometimes misunderstood or viewed negatively. It is crucial to emphasize that equity does not mean lowering standards or prioritizing one group over another. Instead, equity ensures that every student has a fair chance to succeed by addressing systemic barriers and leveling the playing field.

Equity means:

Fairness | Accountability | Opportunities for all students

Equity in Action: How local school boards can lead the way

- **Assess Community Needs:** Conduct equity audits to identify disparities in outcomes, resources, funding, and opportunities.
- **Allocate Resources Thoughtfully:** Direct funding and support to the areas of greatest need, ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Include students, parents, and community members in conversations about equity to build understanding and trust.
- **Monitor Progress:** Use data to monitor student progress, track the effectiveness of equity initiatives, and adjust strategies as needed.

We must work together to ensure that all students, regardless of their zip code or the size of their school division, receive the support necessary to achieve positive academic outcomes. From NOVA to Southwest Virginia, when inequities persist there are costs to all involved including missed opportunities for economic development, increased need for community support, and fewer Virginians ready to serve and lead. At VSBA we believe equity is essential to fulfilling the promise of public education. By embracing equity, we ensure that every child—regardless of their background—has the tools, resources, and opportunities they need to succeed.

Let's continue to work together to create schools where every student can thrive.