



**EDUCATION COMMISSION  
OF THE STATES**  
Your education policy team.

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# EQUITY IN EDUCATION: Key questions to consider

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Along with a commitment to educational attainment, it is imperative for state policymakers to harness their power to make equity-focused policy decisions. All students should be afforded the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their future goals, yet inequities in the education system continue to stifle those opportunities for many students. Educational **equality** means that all students receive equal access to the same educational pathways. While this is a laudable goal, simply leveling the field is not enough. States should strive for **equity** in educational opportunities, providing all students with the unique supports they need to succeed.

A focus on equity takes into consideration the varying personal experiences and social identifiers that impact students' educational opportunities, including race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, family background and others. To address these inequities, education leaders must first understand that diverse students have diverse needs. States have the power to advance educational equity by targeting resources and crafting policy that challenge the status quo.

Education Commission of the States supports states in identifying their equity needs and bringing together thought partners across the education field to better understand, develop and implement decisions that improve opportunities for all students. To move the needle on equity in education, Education Commission of the States proposes increased intentionality of policy assessment and development across four pillars of work: teaching and leading, learning and transitioning, measuring and improving, and financing. In this brief, a list of key equity-minded questions to consider within each of these target areas is included. This list — though not exhaustive — can serve as a guide for state education leaders as they evaluate their policy options across the P20 spectrum.

## Teaching and Leading

All students deserve the support of quality teachers and leaders as they move through their educational journeys from pre-K through postsecondary and the workforce. Unfortunately, inequities exist in students' access to effective educators and leaders across the P-20 spectrum. This section provides equity-minded questions to consider when evaluating teaching and leadership issues.

### Does your state....

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- ...address pay inequities and improve professional development opportunities for early childhood educators to recruit and retain highly-effective teachers across all pre-K programs?
- ...require an endorsement or license specifically of P-3 teachers to ensure the use of developmentally appropriate practices in all classrooms?
- ...have a K-3 [principal certification](#), ensuring that all principals understand how to best support teachers and all students in the early elementary years?
- ...have teacher [preparation, certification and professional development policies](#) in place to recruit, retain and support a diverse workforce to improve student outcomes, particularly for students of color?
- ...require that schools report on teacher diversity across several demographic dimensions and help create a plan for improving or maintaining diversity of staff to support and engage diverse learners in the classroom?
- ...clearly define [effective teaching](#) and track and publicly report the distribution of highly-effective teachers across schools and districts, including those with many students from diverse backgrounds?
- ...have processes in place to discourage excessive teacher absenteeism to prevent negative impacts on student achievement?
- ...implement cultural competency standards as a part of curriculum and program design to equip educators to work effectively with all students?
- ...support [recruitment and retention of diverse faculty](#) that is both representative of multicultural college student populations and is uniquely qualified to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of students?

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## Learning and Transitioning

For students to achieve their full academic potential, they must receive equitable opportunities to pursue rigorous coursework while moving seamlessly between grades and institutions. Many students face social, emotional and academic challenges during these transitions, challenges that may be compounded for students with diverse needs who may not receive the proper supports. Below are equity-minded questions to consider related to student learning and transitions.

### Does your state....

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- ...track pre-K and full-day [kindergarten enrollment](#) by student sub-group for all programs to determine potential gaps in access?
- ...align the state's early learning guidelines to the state's elementary grade standards to ensure quality and consistency across the early learning continuum?
- ...encourage the engagement of all families in the discussion of student achievement and placement data during the pre-K to kindergarten transition process?
- ...actively investigate and address the [broadband needs](#) of students and teachers located in connectivity deserts to ensure access to online resources?
- ...address potential [safety and mental health concerns](#) by providing all students adequate access to school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, nurses and advisers?
- ...ensure that every high school student has access to rigorous coursework taught by qualified instructors, including [Advanced Placement](#), [STEM](#), [dual enrollment](#), [arts](#) and [gifted programs](#)?
- ...have a statewide college and career readiness definition to ensure equity in college preparation for all students?
- ...implement broad and inclusive [admission](#), remedial and placement policies so all students have an opportunity to pursue postsecondary education?
- ...promote college access programs and [guided pathways](#) to college degrees for low-income students, returning adults and students of color?
- ...implement credit [transfer and articulation policies](#) between education systems and institutions ensuring smooth transitions for students, particularly those with unique needs?

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## Measuring and Improving

Education systems should be held accountable not only for providing spaces for learning and fostering student growth, but also for continued assessment of these systems to support equity. In this section, equity-minded questions to consider when measuring and developing strategies to improve educational systems are provided.

### Does your state....

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- ...give policy and fiscal authority to an entity that governs early learning, allowing it to allocate resources in a way that best serves all students?
- ...have policies in place to address [chronic absenteeism](#), [suspensions and expulsions](#) in the early years so that they do not disproportionately affect the most vulnerable students?
- ...align pre-K data with K-12 and postsecondary longitudinal data systems to help ensure smooth transitions for all students?
- ...meaningfully [engage community members](#) when designing [accountability](#) systems to ensure the system addresses their concerns around equity issues?
- ...ask schools and districts to consider test bias, which introduces errors into measurements and comparisons of student achievement, when selecting [assessments](#)?
- ...measure sub-group performance and analyze those data to target interventions for struggling students and schools?
- ...monitor the distribution of student disciplinary actions across populations of students to ensure equitable responses for all students?
- ...utilize [statewide longitudinal data systems](#) that provide information disaggregated by race, ethnicity and income status to identify trends in student attendance, college readiness and other equity concerns across the P-20 pipeline?
- ...have an articulated attainment goal that specifically includes targets for all student populations as part of the state's strategic or master plan?

## Financing

Identifying and appropriating funding for educational programs across the spectrum remains critical to the provision of high-quality education and to advancing states' equity agendas. While funding models and state allocation of resources differ in how they address — or inadvertently suppress — equity issues, targeted funding streams and support programs serve as significant levers of change across the P-20 spectrum. Below are questions to consider to advance equity through funding.

### Does your state....

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- ...contribute to [pre-K funding](#) in an equitable way across all districts?
- ...fund full-day kindergarten in every district through the state's school funding formula and provide funding at the same level as first-12th grade?
- ...financially incentivize the development and continued enhancement of high-quality early learning programs to provide equity in early learning opportunities?
- ...implement a process to identify at-risk students and provide them with additional resources through either the school [funding formula](#) or a categorical funding program?
- ...regularly evaluate the adequacy of funding across schools, districts and student populations to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student bodies?
- ... have [financial aid policies](#) that are broad and inclusive enough to cover all student populations, including low-income students, adults and students of color?
- ...prioritize need-based financial aid to provide resources where they are most needed?
- ...have well-defined accountability measures to mitigate increasing [debt-burdens](#) for students, especially low-income students?
- ...holistically evaluate non-education financial resources — housing, child care and food security — that support postsecondary learning?

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## Taking Steps Forward

State policymakers and education leaders are encouraged to develop additional questions that support their goals of increasing educational equity in their state. As Education Commission of the States continues to serve as a collaborative partner in this work, a list of aligned works from other leaders committed to advancing equity in education follows.

### Equity Partners:

- [The Education Trust](#)
- [Leadership for Educational Equity](#)
- [National Equity Project](#)

### Relevant Resources:

- [Accountability Under ESSA: How States Can Design Systems that Advance Equity and Opportunity](#) — The New Teacher Project
- [Equity and ESSA: Leveraging Educational Opportunity Through the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) — Learning Policy Institute
- [Advancing Equity through ESSA: Strategies for State Leaders](#) — The Council of Chief State School Officers and The Aspen Institute
- [Equity of Opportunity](#) — U.S. Department of Education
- [Educational Equity Resources](#) — Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis
- [From Financial Transparency to Equity: Using ESSA to Advance Equity and Excellence](#) — Chiefs for Change
- [Educational Equity: What does it mean? How do we know when we achieve it?](#) — Center for Public Education
- [Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs](#) — The Council of Chief State School Officers and The Aspen Institute

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