Educational equity is an evolutionary concept. Over the years, legislation, court decisions, research, and practice have expanded its meaning, and the concept has grown from its original goal of ensuring equal access to courses, facilities, and programs regardless of race, sex, or national origin to include equitable treatment of and proportionate outcomes for all students. Educational equity also encompasses specific remedies that students with diverse educational needs can use to access school curricula. For example, schools must ensure that students with limited English proficiency acquire language skills, through either a bilingual or an English as a second language program, to help them benefit from instruction in regular classrooms and achieve appropriate academic levels.

Despite federal and state legislation, court cases, and dedicated efforts by equity specialists and educators who are committed to realizing equity in schools, a wide range of inequities persist that affect the life achievement of many students, especially female students; students from low socioeconomic households; or students who are part of a racial, ethnic, or language minority. Until recently, equity language was clearly missing from most reform initiatives. But for equity in education to be realized, it must be an explicit component of the school reform effort. To send the message that equity is a priority among the many demands facing educators today, efforts to attain educational equity must begin with making the philosophy and practice of equity a part of school policies. Principals’ and other school leaders’ support for such policies will help ensure that equitable procedures and practices eventually become institutionalized.

Common Misperceptions About Equity
Several common misperceptions tend to slow progress toward educational equity, and exploring the following assumptions can give us a yardstick against which to measure our beliefs about achieving equity or eliminating inequities:

- **Assumption:** Equity reduces quality and takes something from schools and students.
  - **Reality:** Programs and practices that promote equity enhance the educational environment by improving teaching and learning opportunities for all students.

- **Assumption:** Providing equity in education for diverse student populations will cause us to lose our “American” heritage.
  - **Reality:** Equity for all students adds to the mosaic of our heritage and enriches it.

- **Assumption:** Historical inequities can be corrected by resource allocations.
  - **Reality:** In spite of magnet school funding and other targeted resource allocation, minority and female students are still underrepresented in high-level courses and activities and in nontraditional vocational education programs.

To achieve educational equity, schools must create student-centered learning environments in which each student receives what he or she requires to access school programs and activities and meet challenging academic standards.
• **Assumption:** Equal access results in equal educational outcomes.
  **Reality:** Minority students are often assigned to low-track classes with low expectations for achievement.

• **Assumption:** Placement of students in compensatory and remedial programs increases student performance and results in students being ready to succeed in high-level courses.
  **Reality:** These forms of ability grouping have not resulted in educational improvement gains for low-income and ethnic and language minority students.

• **Assumption:** Equity is done!
  **Reality:** Antidiscrimination laws created equal educational opportunity; however, they did not eliminate long-entrenched biased assumptions and practices of individuals and institutions, which continue to result in unequal treatment and disparate outcomes for female, low-income, and linguistically and culturally diverse minority students.

**Disturbing Trends**

The Equity Center (formerly the Center for National Origin, Race and Sex Equity) at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory is one of 10 regional equity assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to assist K–12 public schools in providing equitable, high-quality education for all students. Center services include onsite professional development and technical assistance. The Equity Center has identified several disturbing trends that result in inequitable policies and practices and unsatisfactory student achievement:

• Renewed physical segregation
• Teacher's limited expectations for female, low-income, and linguistically and culturally diverse students
• Cultural bias of many instructional and assessment methods and assessment tools
• Persistence of sex stereotyping and bias
• Ability grouping or tracking that isolates students on the basis of their sex, race, or national origin
• Increasing incidence of violence and harassment on school campuses
• Resistance to inclusive curriculum and the integration of
a variety of cultural perspectives and historical contributions of women and ethnic minorities
• Higher dropout rates for ethnic minority students.

Clearly, equity issues in the new millennia are complex. Many of these trends combine to create such gender-equity issues as girls at risk of dropping out of school, bias in student-teacher interactions, sexual harassment, lower participation and achievement of girls in mathematics and science, and the disproportionate assignment of minority males to special education and lower track classes.

In addition, the need to meet state standards has fueled a new urgency to provide equal educational opportunity to language minority students. Other factors that make the issue of educational equity increasingly important include:
• Increased numbers of students with limited English language skills entering public schools
• Increased numbers of languages spoken by students
• Decreased funding of second language programs.

Students with limited English skills often experience failure in the classroom and drop out of school. Many are either poorly equipped for higher education or lack the required skills to obtain productive and satisfying employment. When tracking or ability grouping is practiced, research shows that high track classes focus on preparing students for college and professional careers, and low track classes emphasize basic skills and nonprofessional jobs. Disproportionate assignments of low-income and minority students to the lower tracks result in inequities in academic and career opportunities. Researcher Jeannie Oakes emphasizes that tracking “limits many students’ schooling opportunities and life chances.”

On the basis of research and best practices, the Equity Center has identified seven key components that are essential to equitable teaching and learning environments. This condensed version provides an overview of each component and a sampling of the strategies the center uses in its professional development activities.

Access
Access refers to both physical and institutional access to learning facilities, resources, and curricular programs to ensure that every student is given equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of education.

Selected Strategies:
• Ensure that all students are given access to resources and have opportunities to achieve the same high standards.
• Give high-needs students the extra time, instruction, and resources they need to succeed.
• Do not reserve rigorous classroom activities for a select few—challenge all students with curricula and instructional strategies that require reasoning, problem solving, and critical thinking.
• Ensure that student groups are diverse and structured so all members are able to take active roles.

Instruction
Equitable instruction uses instructional materials that portray positive images and include the perspectives of diverse groups. It also requires a strong commitment to a pedagogy that honors diverse teaching and learning styles, confronts bias and stereotypes, and displays respect for diversity.

Selected Strategies:
• Incorporate hands-on learning, small group discussion, and problem-solving activities into lessons.
• Use varied teaching styles that meet the needs of individual students and further the learning of the whole class.
• Make connections between subject matter and students’ lives whenever possible.
• Establish and enforce a clear policy prohibiting racial or sexual harassment.
• Confront bias and stereotyping in the school and the classroom.
• Point out and correct instances of cultural or sex discrimination or bias as they occur in class.
• Celebrate different cultural and national holidays. Involve students in preparations and presentations. Compare and contrast cultural similarities and differences.
• Emphasize that everyone has a culture. Include all students in discussions of cultural heritage.
• Incorporate the diversity of students to enrich learning experiences.

Materials
Materials, such as textbooks, audiovisual aids, and supplemental lessons, should be screened to minimize, if not eliminate, bias in content, graphics, pictures, and language.

Selected Strategies:
• Screen all materials used in classrooms for bias.
• Replace biased materials with bias-free materials.
• Use examples of bias found in classroom materials as prompts for discussing discrimination and bias.
• Include contributions from non-European sources to provide a balanced study of world cultures.

Assessment
Ensuring equity and excellence in school settings requires assessment that accounts for variances in student learning styles and cultural backgrounds and is effectively aligned with school curricula, instruction, and improvement goals.

Selected Strategies:
• Use multiple assessment strategies; combine traditional forms of assessment with alternative or performance-based models.
• Ensure that all assessments are developed to measure the intended skills and will not reflect differences in student experiences, cultural values, or the quality of education received.
• Ensure that students with disabilities and limited English proficiency have appropriate accommodations.

Attitudes
Attitudes not only mold a school’s educational environment but also directly affect students’ lives. Biased or prejudiced attitudes may be unintentional, but can nevertheless result in discriminatory behavior that hinders student performance.

Selected Strategies:
• Be aware of your own attitudes and how they influence the way you treat students.
• Examine problematic relationships with students to determine whether bias is a factor.
• Educate yourself about how biased attitudes are formed. Seek out examples that counter stereotypes and biased attitudes.

Interactions
Interactions are perhaps the greatest influence on self-esteem and motivation and can have a profound effect on a student’s enthusiasm and ability to learn. Interactions are shaped by attitudes, which often mask tendencies to relate to students differently depending on race, sex, ethnicity, ability, or other factors.

Selected Strategies:
• Demonstrate the same high expectations for all students. Communicate these expectations regularly and challenge all students’ performance and effort equally.
• Give less-confident students more time to raise their hands and to respond to questions.
• Monitor your use of praise. Reinforce all students for their work and effort equally.

Language
Bias in language is a subtle but powerful influence in creating or reinforcing prejudicial attitudes and perspectives.

Selected Strategies:
• Watch your own language usage in class—for example, using girls to refer to adult women.
• Become informed about nonbiased alternatives and use them at school.
• Take advantage of opportunities to point out biased language in a productive, nonaccusatory way.

The goal of educational equity is not to merely improve academic performance but to provide equal opportunity for life achievement (Eaton 1994). In 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.

These words are truer today than they were 46 years ago. Schools can create equitable teaching and learning environments to ensure excellence for all students through the use of the seven key components of equity that are based on the principles of fairness, equality of access, and parity of results.

References
❏ Center for National Origin, Race and Sex Equity.
### EQUITY AWARENESS INVENTORY

In your role as principal, you lead the way to an equitable teaching and learning environment for students and staff members. Take a moment to complete this self-assessment and reflect on areas that you may need to strengthen to achieve equity in your school.

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<td>1</td>
<td>I provide ongoing opportunities for staff members to receive equity training and actively participate in such training.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>I ensure that all visual displays, school programs, and activities reflect respect, equity, and diversity.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>I ensure that students have access to an inclusive multicultural curriculum.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>I encourage schoolwide participation in commemorative days, weeks, and months, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, National American Indian Day, Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, Women’s History Month, and Kwanzaa, in addition to traditional celebrations.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>I apply equity principles when dealing with all staff members, parents, students, and community members.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>I am responsive to parent, teacher, and student concerns about perceived inequities in materials, programs, and interactions.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>I train students and teachers about the damaging effects of malicious verbal and physical racial and sexual harassment, establish a policy against such behavior, and instruct staff members and students that such behavior will not be tolerated.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>I collect and use data in planning for school improvement.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>I am knowledgeable about the demographics of my district and school.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>I ensure that instruction leading to second language proficiency for limited English–proficient students is integrated into the overall curriculum.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>I diligently carry out all state and federal mandates for non-discrimination in all school programs and activities.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>I arrange flexible meetings to accommodate the schedules of working parents and parents needing transportation and child care.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>I gather information on ways to meet the needs of underserved groups.</td>
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The Equity Center at NWREL is one of 10 regional equity assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide professional development and assistance to public schools on educational equity issues based on race, gender and national origin. Assistance to K-12 public schools is free upon request. The center’s service area includes Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Republic of Palau. For information on centers serving other regions visit the center’s homepage at www.nwrel.org/cnorse.

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### EQUITY AWARENESS INVENTORY

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<td>14</td>
<td>I model harmonious intercultural relationships.</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>I avoid stereotyping occupations, abilities, and interests when speaking with staff members, students, parents, and community members.</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>I recruit, hire, retain, and support staff members representing diverse cultural backgrounds.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>I have developed an affirmative action program for employing minority counselors and counselors with disabilities.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>I establish and maintain a safe, caring, and orderly school environment.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>I ensure that physical facilities are kept clean and reasonably attractive and have damages repaired immediately.</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>I provide a written code of conduct that specifies acceptable student behavior, due process, discipline procedures, and consequences.</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>I administer reprimands in a neutral, objective way, focusing on students’ behavior, not their personalities, and I refrain from administering unreasonable consequences to students.</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>I establish an environment that promotes high expectations for all students’ achievement and discourages complacency about student achievement.</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>I provide processes for monitoring the school’s ongoing instructional efforts and establish an environment in which a positive attitude toward change is encouraged.</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>I train and work with parents to improve their children’s academic skills and attitudes toward education.</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>I provide parents with regular information about their children’s physical, emotional, and academic development at different levels.</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>I provide leadership and intervention in retention and re-entry programs for dropouts and operate programs in a setting that focuses on improving student self-esteem and motivation to complete their education.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>I set concrete goals for at-risk students early in their school careers and measure progress against these goals.</td>
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Adapted from The Fourth R: Responsibility: Ensuring Educational Excellence Through Equity and Effective Practices.

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