



## Equity Stances Activity

*Developed by John Newlin, Southern Maine Partnership, University of Southern Maine.*

Participants will engage in an activity to examine some of the tough questions that arise when educators act to address equity in student learning but that are often obscured by vague language about equity.

### Goals for the Activity

- Participants will deepen their understanding of several meanings of the word “equity” in regards to student learning.
- Participants will learn an activity that can be used to effectively engage members of their school community in the issue of equity in student learning.
- Participants will engage in activities that invite them to examine potential inconsistencies between and among their beliefs, language, and actions regarding equity in student learning.

Please note: Participants will probably NOT reach an agreement during the activity on how to define equity.

### Introductions

**10 Minutes**

The facilitators introduce themselves and ask each participant say name, workplace and town (ONLY). Provide the agenda with Appendix A on the back. Go over the agenda.

### Introduction to Equity Stances

**5 Minutes**

Begin with something like, “The equity issue can be confusing. Clarity is elusive. Exploration of the issue often feels risky. This activity is intended to provide a safe place to explore and examine the issue in greater depth than often happens.” Ask participants to read the 5 stances in Appendix A alone and quietly for now and decide which stance **most closely** matches their own. “This is intended as an opportunity to form a first impression based on reading very brief explanations of each stance. We will dig deeper in a few minutes.” Display the stances via overhead if desired – only the stances, not the examples or the tough questions.

### Read Full Stances Handout and Write

**10 Minutes**

Distribute Appendix B, which includes the examples in practice and the tough questions. Participants are given time to individually (without discussion) read and write their initial reactions, questions, etc.

### Text-based Discussion

**20-40 Minutes**

Focus Question: What do you believe schools should do regarding equity in student learning? If the group is larger than 12, break into two groups. Participants will be reminded to refer to the text.

### Three Levels Protocol (groups of 3 or 4)

**25 Minutes**

Remind participants to pick a passage that has implications for their work. There may be time for more than one round. See Appendix C below.

### Conclusion and Debrief

**15 Minutes**

Distribute and briefly explain the Facilitators’ Notes for the activity – see Appendix D below. Participants are invited to ask questions, make comments and suggestions, and reflect on adapting the activity for home audiences. With 2 minutes left, check-in on the Activity Goals: Comments or questions? Please fill out feedback form — Appendix E.

## Appendix A

### Equity Stances Activity: Five Different Stances on Equity in Student Learning

**Essential Question for the Equity Stances Activity:** *What do you believe schools should do regarding equity in student learning? (This is not asking what you believe about goals; this is asking what you believe about actions.)*

**Stance A: Equity as Initial Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive the same initial educational opportunity, and that each student’s response to this initial opportunity will be used to determine the kind of academic program they receive going forward.

**Stance B: Equity as Ongoing Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will have easy access to all academic programs every year, regardless of past performance levels or other factors.

**Stance C: Equity as Personalized Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student’s unique needs.

**Stance D: Equity as Equalization of Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to enable them to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level within a reasonable length of time.

**Stance E: Equity as Equal Results** — Schools should guarantee that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level.

## Appendix B

### Equity Stances Activity: Examples in Practice and Tough Questions

**Essential Question for the Equity Stances Activity:** *What do you believe schools should do regarding equity in student learning? (This is not asking what you believe about goals; this is asking what you believe about actions.)*

**Stance A: Equity as Initial Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive the same initial educational opportunity, and that each student’s response to this initial opportunity will be used to determine the kind of academic program they receive going forward.

- Example in Practice: Student grades or assessment scores are used as gatekeepers for access to certain academic programs or courses.
- Tough questions for those who take this stance:
  - Doesn’t this approach to equity help preserve the status quo, with some students being denied access to academic programs or courses in which they might perform well, based on their past performance and/or someone else’s estimation of their future performance?
  - Shouldn’t access to public school academic programs and courses be open to all students who have a genuine interest in them, regardless of past performance (as in stance B)?

**Stance B: Equity as Ongoing Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will have easy access to all academic programs every year, regardless of past performance levels or other factors.

- Example in Practice: Every student is allowed to participate in any academic program or course, regardless of past performance.
- Tough questions for those who take this stance:
  - Doesn’t allowing some students to participate in certain programs or courses set them up for a diminished likelihood of success, in the short term or long term?
  - Shouldn’t public schools do more to promote the aspirations and performance of students who have a background of lower performance than simply making all programs “open (as in stances C, D and E)?”

**Stance C: Equity as Personalized Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student’s unique needs.

- Example in Practice: School practices and resources are distributed according to the school’s judgment of what each student needs, which is informed by educators, the student, and the student’s caretakers.
- Tough questions for those who take this stance:
  - Given limited school resources and the greater power held by parents of privilege, won’t any attempt to “meet every student’s unique needs” result in public schools always doing more to meet the unique needs of the children of privileged parents than they do to meet the unique needs of other students?
  - Isn’t a focus only on what each student “needs” likely to result in an underestimation of what some students need and an academic program that doesn’t offer these students a promising future?

**Stance D: Equity as Equalization of Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to enable them to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level within a reasonable length of time.

- Example in Practice: School practices and resources (in addition to special education resources) are heavily weighted in favor of providing different and more programs and support for lower performing students.
- Tough questions for those who take this stance:
  - Doesn't heavily weighting school practices and resources in favor of lower performing students create an attitude of dependency within those students?
  - Shouldn't school practices and resource allocations be evenly weighted on what each and every student needs rather than just on what each lower performing student needs (as in stance C)?
  - Shouldn't students have access to these academic programs for an unlimited length of time (as in stance E)?

**Stance E: Equity as Equal Results** - Schools should guarantee that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level.

- Example in Practice: School practices and resources (in addition to special education resources) are heavily weighted in favor of providing different and more programs and support for lower performing students, including students who have become adults.
- Tough questions for those who take this stance:
  - Won't providing these programs for an unlimited length of time be either too expensive or result in schools certifying that some students have demonstrated something that they actually have not demonstrated?
  - Wouldn't a school be better off not making guarantees for results that it doesn't have sufficient resources or power to fully honor, and instead guarantee what actions it will take (as in stances A, B, C and D)?

## Appendix C

### Three Levels Text Protocol

#### Purpose

To deepen understanding of a text and explore implications for participants' work.

#### Facilitation

Stick to the time limits. Each round takes up to 5 minutes per person in a group. Emphasize the need to watch air time during the brief "group response" segment. Do 1 – 3 rounds. Can be used as a prelude (or follow-up) to a Text-based Discussion or by itself.

#### Roles

Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates); participants

#### Process

1. Sit in a circle and identify a facilitator/timekeeper
2. If participants have not done so ahead of time, have them read the text and identify passages (and a couple of back-ups) that they feel may have important implications for their work.
3. A Round consists of:
  - One person using up to 3 minutes to:  
LEVEL 1: read aloud the passage they have selected  
LEVEL 2: say what they think about the passage (interpretation, connection to past experiences, etc.)  
LEVEL 3: say what they see as the implications for their work.
  - The group responding (for a **TOTAL** of up to 2 minutes) to what has been said.
4. After all rounds have been completed, debrief the process.

## Appendix D

### **Facilitator's Notes for Equity Stances Activity: Five Different Stances on Equity in Student Learning**

1. This activity has been refined over the past two years thanks to the contributions of more than 200 educators affiliated with the National School Reform Faculty, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and/or the Southern Maine Partnership at the University of Southern Maine.
2. The attached activity is based, in part, on the following beliefs/theory of action:
  - A belief that expressing a wide range of beliefs on an issue in clear and evenly-biased language can clarify the true strengths and weaknesses of each belief and can facilitate a deeper understanding of the issue and the values embedded in it.
  - A belief that using provocative questions to probe values can help an individual come to a deeper understanding of the values basis of their beliefs and the potential dissonance between beliefs and actions.
  - A belief that helping people identify dissonances between their beliefs and actions can be a powerful force for positive change.
3. There are situations in which the use of this exercise may be counterproductive. Care should be taken to make sure participants have a sufficient degree of mutual trust and respect to engage in an exercise that attempts to directly highlight potential differences between beliefs and actions.
4. Group size for the dialogue may vary from 2 to 12.
5. A text-based or other protocol may or may not be used. Although it is common to give participants a chance to discuss a text in small groups before engaging in whole group dialogue, this activity has worked well when the text is first discussed in a larger group and then in smaller groups, in rounds. The whole group dialogue increases the chances of hearing multiple perspectives, and the smaller groups give more chances to go deeper into ideas of particular interest.
6. If a participant proposes language for their own stance on equity, ask them to connect it to the five stances: Which of the five is it most akin to? How is it similar and how is it different?
7. The five stances use the generic term “academic program” rather than specific practices in order to help keep the focus on intended results and the values embedded in those intentions. Some participants may want to quickly reject all five of the stances and instead create their own stance that mentions specific practices. While this can be a valuable follow-up activity, doing this before engaging in a thorough exploration of the five stances can preempt any deep discussion about intended results and values.
8. Work to make sure all five stances get discussed at least briefly,

**Possible Follow-up Activities (in no particular order):**

- Discuss the stances through some of the follow-up questions (below).
- Do some observations in your school over a period of time (perhaps a month) using the five stances as lenses and categories for collecting evidence.
- Do the activity with a group of students.
- Use the stances in conjunction with a vignette of school experiences or a case study of schooling.
- Use the stances in conjunction with the Profiles of a Student activity.
- Use the essential question of the stances activity within a Futures Protocol.

**Possible Follow-up Questions (in no particular order):**

- If no students in a school are experiencing high quality instruction, does equity really matter?
- Should the idea of a “culturally relevant education” be viewed as one of the “needs” mentioned in Stance C and/or part of the “well-designed” academic program mentioned in Stance D, or should it be specifically mentioned?
- What aspects of your school operate from which of the five stances? Are one or more of the five stances dominant in your school?
- What would need to change in your school for it to reflect the stance(s) that you believe are best?
- What terms in the stances, examples and questions are most likely to be interpreted differently by different people?
- What assumptions are embedded in each of the stances, examples and questions.
- What might you do to adhere to the stance(s) you believe are best?
- Which stances are most likely to give students experiences that will help them compete for opportunities in the broader society?
- Which stances are most likely to improve social justice in the broader society?
- Could you (or a school) be adhering to C, D, or E and still not be serving kids well?

**Appendix E: Feedback Form - Please circle one response; comments are encouraged but optional.**

1. Overall, I think this activity was worthwhile.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree

Comments:

2. The activity met the goal of helping participants deepen their understanding of several meanings of the word "equity" in regards to student learning.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

3. The activity met the goal of helping participants learn an activity that can be used to effectively engage members of their school community in the issue of equity in student learning.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

4. The workshop met the goal of helping participants engage in activities that invite them to examine potential inconsistencies between and among their beliefs, language, and actions regarding equity in student learning.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

5. The larger group discussion portion of the activity was worthwhile.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

6. The smaller group discussion portion of the activity was worthwhile.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

7. The handouts from the activity will be useful to me again.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree      n/a

Comments:

8. The activity was well-organized and well-facilitated.

strongly disagree      disagree      somewhat disagree      somewhat agree      agree      strongly agree

Comments:

9. Please write any additional comments on the back.