



STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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New Jersey Department of Education Highlights Educational Equity

Five Questions with the NJDOE's Tonya Breland

As the Director of Professional Development for the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), Tonya Breland leads the effort to provide school districts with professional development and training, mentoring and professional leadership standards. With more than 1,200 educators slated to attend the NJDOE's first-ever "Equity for All" statewide conference on July 31, Tonya's work has especially focused on equity in education. Below Tonya Breland talks about why equity in education is so important.

What is equity?

Equity is ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education, so they can succeed academically, socially, and beyond high school. This issue particularly involves historically underserved and underrepresented students, such as children of color, students with disabilities, students in poverty, English Language Learners (ELLs), and LGBTQ students.

Equity in all its complexities is the antidote for so many obstacles that can hinder students from succeeding. Conversations about equity shine a light on resources for students, access and opportunities, and the likelihood to be included.

The equity umbrella includes high academic expectations for all, culturally proficient educators and students, and providing support and services to English language learners. It also includes fostering a diverse teaching workforce, addressing students' social and emotional needs, making resources available to families, and ensuring all students have a sense of belonging in the school community.

Why is equity important in education?

Equity is one of the civil rights issues of our day. Public schools have a moral imperative to address inequities that create barriers to student success. Students who are poorly educated or not given the same access to opportunities as their wealthier peers are at a disadvantage. Inequities lead to economic consequences that perpetuate the disparities between groups of people.

How does equity benefit students?

While teachers of color represent 16 percent of New Jersey's educators,

Over 56% of New Jersey's student population are children of color, and 27% are English language learners. Research shows educators who are committed to culturally responsive teaching are also advocates for their students and see their students' differences as assets rather than deficits. Being advocates build stronger relationships with students and lead to increased student achievement and family engagement.

This has an effect even after high school. A recent report from TNTP, The New Teacher Project, found that while more students are enrolling in college than ever, many struggle once they get there. "Nationwide, 40 percent of college students (including 66 percent of Black college students and 53 percent of Latinx college students) take at least one remedial course, where they spend time and money learning skills they were told they'd already mastered in high school," said the report, titled "The Opportunity Myth." This can cost families thousands in remediation and leads to higher college drop-out rates. Some recommendations include making access to grade-appropriate assignments a priority for all students, regardless of race, income or performance level; giving all students, especially those who are behind academically, access to engaging and challenging instruction; and conducting an equity audit to determine needs and areas in need of change.

What are we seeing taking place in schools?

Equity is a growing buzz word in many schools, with some taking the lead in creating equity-focused policies, making equity a real part of daily practice, and dedicating the time and resources to improve equity for students.

Some examples include schools implementing LGBTQ policies; offering instruction that adapts to trauma that students may be experiencing; and bolstering Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs that give children the skills needed to manage emotions, set goals and make responsible decisions.

Schools are working to ensure that students of color are not disproportionately represented in special education programming and, conversely, that they have access to gifted and talented programs. Schools are having courageous conversations about race and bias; developing equity councils and teams; implementing culturally relevant curricula; exploring alternatives to traditional disciplinary practices; and implementing culturally responsive teaching.

What is taking place with the 'Equity for All' conference on Wednesday?

More than a thousand New Jersey educators will spend a day during the summer to take part in the Department of Education's first-ever 'Equity for All' conference. It will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday, July 31, at The College of New Jersey in Ewing.

The conference will feature approximately 50 workshops on issues such as supporting LGBTQ students, how to work with children exposed to trauma, and overcoming bias in the school. State-level and nationally known speakers will address the audience, the Department of Education will recognize 11 districts and charter schools with Lighthouse District Awards, and TED-trained educators will give presentations to attendees.