



**Teach.
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the education blog

Why equity matters
in education—and what
to do about it

nwea

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When we consider the children in school today, it's no longer accurate to say that student demographics are changing. Student demographics *have* changed.

The Pew Research Center noted that only 52% of kids who were 6–21 in 2018 identified as white and non-Hispanic. A quarter identified as Hispanic of any race. Meanwhile, teacher demographics remain the same: predominantly white, non-Hispanic, and female.

Learn more about what you can do to improve equity in your classroom, school, or district with practical advice from our Teach. Learn. Grow. authors.



Partnering to help all kids learn[®].



Why an equitable curriculum matters

Aaliyah Samuel

“Why didn’t you use your flesh color to color in the picture?”

*“I did! I used the flesh colored pencil.
Did I not do it right?”*

*“Well, peach isn’t your flesh color.
You should use one of the browns.”*

“Oh. I never knew my skin color was flesh, too.”

*“‘Flesh’ just means ‘skin.’ It’s ok.
I’ll give you another picture and you can try again.”*

This conversation took place between an African American fourth grader and her teacher in a North Carolina classroom over fifteen years ago. The student, now in her late 20s, still remembers it. While seemingly minuscule, the short exchange inspired an awakening in that child: she, too, had a place in the school curriculum—and the world.

What effect will equitable curricula have on students of *all* backgrounds? How can educators and administrators be at the helm of delivering equity in curricula?

The classroom as a mirror

That child was the only African American student in her class, one of only three in the fourth grade, and one of fewer than ten in the elementary portion of her K-12 school. Few if any of the books, topics, or characters she encountered reflected her brown skin, curly hair, or family background.

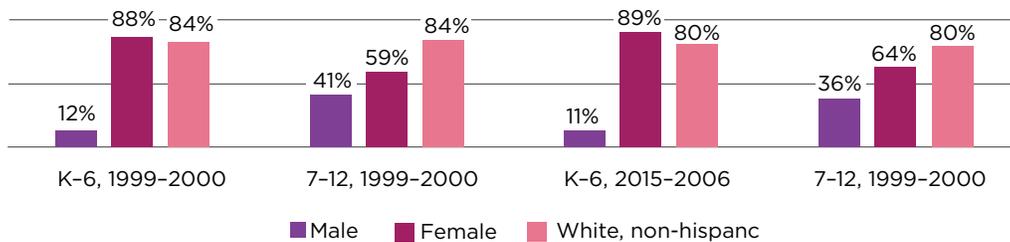
This is commonplace in classrooms across the country even today. As early reports of the 2020 census indicate, the majority of students beginning school that fall will be from minority backgrounds. And though our [country’s demographics are rapidly changing](#), the increase of children of color, with disabilities, and from varied socioeconomic backgrounds has not always been the harbinger of intentional efforts to write curricula with an equity lens.

Simply put, what happens in the classroom can have a lasting effect on the psyche and well-being of a child.

Teachers do so much in their classrooms and with their students to ensure that the next generation is comprised of curious, compassionate, and informed adults. They bring curricula to life and serve as positive role models in children’s lives. But it can be difficult to teach what you do not know or understand.

The teaching profession has historically been—and still remains—a field dominated by [white, middle-class women](#). Many of these teachers may have the best intentions when it comes to building a classroom that accounts for all their students in an equitable way. But it’s possible that, for some of them, the privilege that’s inherent in being white and middle class could make it difficult for them to know how to reach children who are different from them.

Teacher gender and race/ethnicity by grade and year



Source: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clr.asp

The questions we must ask ourselves now are these: What effect will equitable curricula have on students of *all* backgrounds? How can educators and administrators be at the helm of delivering equity in curricula? I’ll dig into that first question now and tackle the second one in an upcoming post.



Equity serves everyone

Research has shown that an [equity approach to curriculum design benefits all students](#), not just students or teachers of color. When the teacher workforce is diverse and curricula include stories, history, and characters from various backgrounds, children will thrive. For children of all ages and levels of development, equity in curricula can do three critical things:

1. Enrich language, reasoning, writing, discussion, and literacy skills by creating opportunities for conversations on different perspectives and challenging belief systems
2. Increase engagement among students by helping them feel connected to a curriculum that honors their story and background
3. Improve school climate and safety by giving students a sense of belonging and collective responsibility in the classroom

A curriculum that misrepresents history or does not introduce opportunities for students to engage positively in their own learning can be a disservice to students. However unintended, the consequences may be disengagement, a lack of connection, identity issues, and low self-esteem. That same fourth grader I mentioned might have become deeply self-conscious as she grew, handicapped by a powerful myth that she just wasn't good enough, had it not been for that conversation with her teacher. Simply put, what happens in the classroom can have a lasting effect on the psyche and well-being of a child. **TLG**

4 ways administrators can create an equitable curriculum

Aaliyah Samuel

In my last post, I explored the positive effects an equitable curriculum can have on all students, regardless of their race, socioeconomic background, gender, and other factors. Designing a curriculum with equity in mind is a big task, and it can feel overwhelming. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Begin with professional development

Ensure all educators in your school or district have the tools to provide an emotionally, mentally, and physically safe space for all learners. Professional development on recognizing bias and diversity, equity, and inclusion (also known as DEI) can equip educators with the proper tools to confidently engage with children of all backgrounds in a positive, productive way.

Among these tools is the ability to recognize—and respond to—historical traumas that can manifest for students. The story of the flesh colored pencil that I mentioned in my previous post is a perfect example of this. That Black child believed her skin was inferior and unable to be represented in a drawing. To support her, the teacher quickly and astutely realized this paradigm, affirmed who the student was, and gave her the chance to see herself in her work by creating a new drawing.

Work this training into existing professional learning communities. Consider making it a year-long effort so topics can be explored in depth, there's time for self-reflection, and interruptions to teaching are less obtrusive.

Professional development on recognizing bias and diversity, equity, and inclusion (also known as DEI) can equip educators with the proper tools to confidently engage with children of all backgrounds in a positive, productive way.

Continue with self-reflection

It can be helpful to explore your own ideas and potential biases, as well as your goals for your school or district, when working toward an equitable curriculum. Here are some things to try:

- Ask yourself these important questions: What kind of school environment do *you* want to promote? How will *you* include teachers, parents, staff, and community members in making your vision a reality? What types of culture shifts need to occur at the administrative, teacher, and student level?

- Explore your ideas about your student population and their families. When you think about them and their needs, do you begin with a strengths-based approach? You can learn more about taking a strengths-based approach—and about effective classroom management in general—in [“5 principles of outstanding classroom management”](#)
- Think about how you can support teachers in sharing and executing innovative ideas around curriculum

Address hiring practices and board membership

Discussions about equity at the district and school level can be more fruitful when there are many voices in the room. Take a look around at your next meeting. Do the leaders around you reflect your student body accurately?

If your students can't see themselves in their teachers and school leaders, make conscious efforts to diversify your team through hiring practices. EdSurge offers useful tips in their 2018 article [“Diversity in hiring doesn't start with hiring.”](#) And in [“Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color,”](#) the Learning Policy Institute shares additional tips, including the following:

- Start a student loan forgiveness program
- Hire earlier in the year—and ensure hiring committees are diverse
- Partner with local universities to recruit student teachers and recent graduates
- Establish a mentorship program

To support people who may be interested in running for your board, reach out to your community, including the parents and guardians of your students. Remind them of important dates in your local election cycle and that [most anyone interested in running is likely eligible](#).

Be patient

Challenging work is rarely done quickly. But if you make equity a priority and work toward it consistently, you'll make great strides. **TLG**

It can be helpful to explore your own ideas and potential biases.

8 ways teachers can make a curriculum equitable

Aaliyah Samuel

In my last two posts, I've discussed the positive effects of equitable curriculum on all students and offered some suggestions on how administrators can work toward equity. Teachers, it's your turn!

Once your administrators have empowered you with the tools you need to recognize bias and understand diversity, equity, and inclusion, reaching students through your curriculum will almost certainly become easier. Here are some things you can do to empower students and foster an inclusive classroom community.

1. Pick diverse books

Books that allow students to see themselves in the characters can help students feel like an important part of their classroom and like their story is worth telling, too. For students who are accustomed to seeing themselves in countless media, the opportunity to read about a character unlike them can broaden their world view and help them build empathy. Here are just a few worthwhile titles to consider:

Need more ideas?

Search on diversebookfinder.org and weneeddiversebooks.org.

Elementary grades

Can I Play, Too?

Mo Willems

Chocolate Me!

Taye Diggs

Julián Is a Mermaid

Jessica Love

Knock, Knock

Daniel Beaty

**Marisol McDonald
and the Clash Bash**

Monica Brown

One Word from Sophia

Jim Aaverbeck

Middle schoolers

El Deafo

Cece Bell

Tomás and the Library Lady

Pat Mora

High schoolers

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison

Copper Sun

Sharon Draper

The House on Mango Street

Sandra Cisneros

Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi

2. Welcome other languages into the classroom

Try to learn a few words in a student's native or home language that you can teach to the entire class. For students who are learning English, this can be a powerful opportunity to see their classmates learn a new language, too.

If you're not sure how to go about learning yourself, reach out to your multilingual students. Ask them to teach you some simple words. Or ask them to teach both you and the class at the same time. They'll probably be happy to help, and the temporary role reversal could strengthen your teacher-student relationship.

For students who are accustomed to seeing themselves in countless media, the opportunity to read about a character unlike them can broaden their world view and help them build empathy.

3. Think about how you ask questions

Reframe questions during discussions to open up conversations. For example, try asking "Can you describe?" instead of "What is?" This can help students feel comfortable sharing personal experiences, including aspects of their identity and culture.

4. Encourage sharing

Create opportunities for students to share unique experiences so they can all get to know each other; they may be surprised by how much they have in common. Some of this can come from reframing discussion questions, but activities like show-and-tell or reports on cultures and customs can accomplish this, too.

If you're a high school teacher, your students might benefit from hearing from teens outside their school. Share the [America to Me Real Talk](#) video series with them. The website includes conversation guides for educators.

5. Rearrange your classroom

When a child looks around and sees a teacher standing over them and desks arranged from front to back, a hierarchy is established. Arrange desks in a circle or clusters instead to help each child feel they have a stake in the learning process.

6. Reframe the language around students' backgrounds

You're probably saying to yourself, "Yes! I want to do that! But I don't know how." I've been in that same situation. Here are a few alternatives to common phrases or questions we've all used in the classroom.

Common phrase/question	Alternative
Do you celebrate Christmas?	→ What are some of the holiday traditions in your family?
Do your parents speak English?	→ What is the language you use at home?
What is your race/ethnicity?	→ How do you identify?
What country are you from?	→ Can you describe your family's heritage?

Additionally, here is a list of descriptors that can help during discussions of race or ethnicity. Though note that it's often best to ask a person what descriptor they prefer.

- **Peoples of Hispanic or Latin descent:** [Hispanic](#), [Latin](#), Latino, Latina, [Latinx](#), or by country of origin (e.g., Panamanian, Colombian, Cuban). The terms listed here refer to an ethnicity, not a race, and it's important to remember that skin color is not the sole identifier of a person of Hispanic or Latin descent
- **Peoples of African descent:** Black, African American, African, or by country of origin (e.g., Ghanaian, Nigerian, Afro-Colombian)
- **Peoples of European descent:** White, Caucasian, or by country of origin (e.g., Italian, German, Polish)
- **Peoples of Asian or Pacific Island background:** Asian, Asian-American, Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, or by country of origin (e.g., Korean, Chinese, Indian)
- **Native/indigenous peoples:** Native, Native-American, Indigenous, or by tribe (e.g., Cherokee, Algonquian, Sioux)

There's no need to take this important work on alone. Involve fellow teachers and parents in what you're doing.



7. Collaborate

There's no need to take this important work on alone. Involve fellow teachers and parents in what you're doing. Through a joint effort, you might be able to do things like host events for Black History Month in February, Hispanic Heritage Month in the fall, and other holidays, like Day of the Dead or the Chinese New Year.

8. Think about other ways to be inclusive in your classroom

There are lots of other ways to build an inclusive school community. This can include intentional efforts to revise the curriculum, use data to inform policymakers on school climate and student well-being, and implement school-wide practices for teaching. What works for you? Working with your principal and other school leaders will be key.

In closing

We owe an equity approach to curriculum to our students so that like the fourth grader years ago, they know they are valued, empowered, and able to achieve their maximum potential in this world. It's difficult work, but it's worth every bit of effort. Thanks for taking it on. **TLG**

Kick-start Black History Month in your classroom (and keep it going all year)

Erin Ryan

[Black History Month began in 1926 as Negro History Week](#), an event hosted by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. By the late 1960s, the annual event transitioned to a month-long celebration, a result of the Civil Rights movement. It was officially recognized in 1976 by President Gerald Ford.

Today, we mark Black History Month with lectures, concerts, discussions, acts of service, and more. It's a great opportunity to celebrate the legacies and contributions of African Americans, past and present, and inspire the next generation of leaders in your classroom.

I've compiled a collection of resources and ideas to share with your students, their families, and fellow educators, too. Let's count it down, shall we?

5 books for your classroom library

Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut by Derrick Barnes, with illustrations by Gordon C. James (ages 5–12). This critically acclaimed picture book is a love letter to the black barbershop. It's page after beautiful page of black boy joy.

What is Hip-Hop? by Eric Morse, with illustrations by Anny Yi (ages 5–adult). The biographies of hip-hop legends throughout history, written in rhyming verse, are complemented by bold, colorful, clay figure illustrations. This book is a must see.

Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History written and illustrated by Vashti Harrison (ages 6–12). Short biographies of more than three dozen amazing women in black history are paired with illustrations that are child-friendly and delightful.

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and his Orchestra by Andrea Davis Pinkney, with illustrations by Brian Pinkney (ages 8–10). This biographical picture book tells the story of Duke Ellington through lyrical, jazz-like prose. The book also includes additional resources to learn more about Ellington's life.

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (ages 12–18). This young adult novel is a fictionalized account of a police encounter that turns violent and is told through the eyes of two high school classmates: the victim, who is black, and the reluctant witness, who is white.

4 things to watch (with or without your students)

Hidden Figures (ages 10–adult). The true story of three black women in STEM who worked for NASA in the 1950s and '60s. It's critically acclaimed and inspiring, and it has a great soundtrack to boot.

WATCH THE TRAILER

13th (ages 16–adult). This documentary looks at the history of the criminalization, over policing, and mass incarceration of African Americans following the 13th amendment, which abolished slavery.

WATCH THE TRAILER

Glory (ages 16–adult). This unforgettable film tells the true story of the 54th Massachusetts regiment, the first all–African American regiment to fight in the Civil War.

WATCH THE TRAILER

Pushout (adults). This feature-length documentary, best reserved for educators and parents, examines the societal, racial, and judicial disparities facing black girls in the classroom. By ignoring or diminishing their humanity, many adults are over disciplining black girls and criminalizing them simply for being themselves.

WATCH THE TRAILER

3 things to listen to

Black History Month playlist by the National Museum of African American Music. A collection of hits, deep cuts, and true classics from multiple genres of popular music. (A few of the songs include profanity, so be mindful if you share this with a younger audience.)

1619, Episode 1: The Fight for a True Democracy. The 1619 project, by *The New York Times*, asks readers to consider an America that begins not in 1776 or 1620, but 1619, the year the first enslaved people arrived on its shores. The print and podcast series explores the consequences of the slave trade and contributions made by African Americans.

Code Switch, Episode 13: Struggling School, or Sanctuary? There are lots of factors that lead to school closures, from finances and low population to a lack of academic progress. These closures disproportionately impact black school children. This episode of Code Switch from NPR talks to students, teachers, and policymakers about what can be done. (Another great episode in a similar vein is **A Tale of Two School Districts.**)

2 things to remember

Get out and explore. See what your local museums, community colleges, universities, houses of worship, and libraries are doing to honor Black History Month, and encourage your students and families to do the same.

Do the work. Black History Month is not an open invitation to put your black colleagues, friends, or students on the spot. If you have questions or things you're curious about, seek out the answer for yourself first, before inviting black people to do the [emotional labor](#).

1 way to keep the good going

Listen. Yep, just listen. The very best way to make black history extend beyond February is to listen and acknowledge the lived experiences of black people. Model for your students how to “pass the mic” and hold space for people who are traditionally underrepresented. It’s a lesson that will improve their lives and the lives of others for years to come. **TLG**



How to use assessment to close gaps and support families

Melissa Stadtfeld

Has diversity increased in your school or district since you became an educator?

[Work by the Pew Research Center](#) has shown that post-Millennials—kids born between 1997 and 2012—are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation to date, with only 52% identifying as white and non-Hispanic. This diversity has led to [higher rates of English language learners](#) (ELLs), too: 4.9 million students in 2016, up from 3.8 million in 2000.

Changing demographics call on us to rethink our approaches to education, from allowing kids to take an assessment in their native language to [making equity a critical component of curriculum development](#).

Reach more ELLs with MAP Spanish

Addressing the needs of students learning English presents many challenges for schools and districts. But taking the time to reach first-generation Hispanic students in particular (those who are foreign born or whose parents are recent immigrants) is especially important. Research shows that [first-generation Hispanic students are more likely to struggle academically](#) than second-generation Hispanic students (those born in the US to American-born parents, or parents who moved here as young children).

One way to meet these students where they are is by allowing them to take an assessment in Spanish while they're still learning English. [MAP® en español](#) can help ensure proper grade and course placement for newcomers in your school or district, and it can also encourage conversations about what happens after placement to support student learning. Here's how:

- **When prior school records are available**, the Spanish screening assessments in [MAP® Growth™](#) can inform and confirm placement decisions. Administering a shorter test and using the data as part of a multiple-measures approach reduces the amount of time a student is required to test before being scheduled for classes. Once enrolled, the student may take either MAP Growth or [MAP® Reading Fluency™](#) in Spanish to show what they know and provide their teacher with key data that can inform instructional strategies

- **When no prior school records are available**, Spanish MAP Growth Reading or MAP Reading Fluency can determine reading levels in a student’s native language. This can prevent over-testing a newcomer. The MAP Growth Student Profile report shows what students are ready to work on next, how they can be grouped by instructional areas, and where they should be placed
- **Once a student has been placed**, teachers can track progress and growth in English and Spanish throughout the year using MAP Growth and MAP Reading Fluency. MAP Growth Skills Checklists help teachers track skill development in English in K-2

Engage parents in the data review process

Parents who have recently arrived in the US are concerned about the needs of their children and their success in school, just like the rest of us. Engaging them in the data review process can foster a meaningful relationship between the school and family and also provides an opportunity to explore ways families can help students outside of school. Here are some resources to try:

- **Family Toolkit:** This site provides a variety of resources to help parents understand MAP Growth, including the [Family Guide](#). Did you know the guide’s available in more than a dozen languages?
- **Visuals in the MAP Growth Family Report:** These, alongside the [sample Spanish translation of the Family Report](#), can help parents understand their child’s achievement and growth and facilitate collaborating on ways families can work with students outside the classroom
- **Recorded audio in MAP Reading Fluency:** When families can hear their student read, it’s easier for teachers to highlight strengths and areas of focus. These conversations can also provide a good opportunity to connect the family to school and community library resources

First-generation Hispanic students are more likely to struggle academically than second-generation Hispanic students.



Use what you know

When thinking about strategies for engaging immigrant families, consider the approaches you already use, whether you're an administrator or classroom teacher. How do you reach out to parents of kids who have been in your school or district for a while? How do you engage them in the community to increase connectedness between home and school?

Your approach with new families should be similar. Just remember to identify key ways to ensure there's a way to communicate with families in their native language, like through a translator. This will increase equitable access to data—and equitable opportunities to grow. **TLG**

How to better prepare kids for kindergarten

Christine Pitts

There is something dreadful about testing incoming kindergarten students at the beginning of the school year. When I was a reading specialist, I assessed students entering with lower proficiency in early literacy and numeracy skills. It was my least favorite part of the job.

These students were typically from non-dominant backgrounds, emerging bilingual, and facing barriers to high-quality early learning opportunities. Our assessment typically unfolded like this: I would pull them from their homeroom. We'd attempt to build a friendly relationship on the walk to my office. The student would begin reading from a scripted testing manual, which required them to identify letters and numbers. The entire process was often extremely difficult for them and left us both feeling emotional and exhausted.

The role of policy and advocacy in early learning

The frustration I felt when working with those young kids was part of what led me to my current role as policy advisor for NWEA. When I speak with policymakers who design statewide assessment models, I always think back to my time working directly with children. I have the honor of challenging policymakers to consider why they are requiring an assessment and to what extent it will benefit or harm the students and families involved in the testing and reporting experience.

[E]ducation policy for outcomes-based accountability has shifted our focus away from the important developmental stages between birth and second grade. [...] What does this lead to in the classroom? [...] [T]eachers at a loss for how to close gaps quickly and effectively.”

I do this work because while I fully believe in the value of high-quality early childhood assessments, I also believe that we, as an education community, haven't agreed on the value of those measures or what they should look like. We need to reach consensus.

The problem: Policy devalues high-quality early childhood measures

Part of the trouble with early childhood assessment in the US is that education policy for outcomes-based accountability has shifted our focus away from the important developmental stages between birth and second grade. Federal policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandate standardized assessment in grades 3–8 while many state policies have an explicit focus on reading achievement at third grade.

What does this lead to in the classroom? Overwrought kindergarteners like the ones I used to work with. First graders who struggle with basic addition. Second graders who repeatedly stumble over irregular verbs. And teachers at a loss for how to close gaps quickly and effectively.

Regardless of these persisting challenges, education policymakers rarely take up the critical issue of measuring and improving social, emotional, and academic development at school entry. It also doesn't account for the important developmental milestones before and after that key transitional time. More specifically, there are few high-quality measures of academic skill development before and at school entry, and there are practically no measures that follow a student's development between kindergarten and the pivotal third grade year.

Education policymakers rarely take up the critical issue of measuring and improving social, emotional, and academic development at school entry.



What have we learned so far?

Panelists at this fall's research conference for the Association for Public Policy and Management (APPAM) shone light on some underlying problems affecting K-2 students. Among them was James Soland, who presented on initial evidence of [trends in student's academic achievement at school entry](#). Dr. Soland and other NWEA researchers found that:

- Students' academic skills at school entry declined slightly from 2014 to 2017, with a larger decrease in mathematics
- Racial/ethnic achievement gaps at school entry narrowed significantly from 2010 to 2017
- More exploration is needed to understand what is causing the decrease in children's skills at school entry
- Policy makers, education leaders, and researchers should collaborate to better understand, support, and evaluate programs tailored for children younger than 5

Critical next steps

In order to serve our youngest learners well, researchers and policymakers must consider the facets of early childcare systems in addition to measures of skills during early learning development. Doing so can dismantle harmful inequities facing our most vulnerable students. Here are just a few of many ways we can begin to do that:

- [Improve access to high-quality childcare](#), especially for underrepresented children, by shifting from preschool-only approaches to a childcare policy that begins at birth
- [Improve access to high-quality early childhood education](#), especially for black and Latino children, at the state level
- Put students at the center of early learning systems by focusing on the re-humanization of children, drawing inspiration from the work at [KairosPDX](#). **TLG**



How to advance equity in gifted education

Beth Tarasawa and Christine Pitts

Did you know [researchers use MAP® Growth™ data](#) to explore how schools and districts can improve opportunities for students?

At Texas A&M, Dr. Karen Rambo-Hernández and her team recently studied how [changing the reference group for identifying gifted students could influence ethnic and racial representation in gifted education](#).

What they found is startling: When the criteria for identifying is set to the top five percent of a school—instead of the top five percent of the country, the national norm traditionally followed—representation for African Americans and Hispanic/Latinx students of any race increased by 300% and 170%, respectively, in math. In reading, the increases were 238% for African Americans and 157% for Hispanic/Latinx kids.

We sat down with Dr. Rambo-Hernández to learn more about her study and its implications. Her answers have been edited for length and clarity.

What drove you to investigate how norms used to identify gifted students can affect equity in education?

One of the problems we were seeing in gifted ed is that the children who are getting served are usually just the ones who meet the national cutoff. And that is a more homogeneous group of students. It's the students who have been afforded more opportunities. They've had more chances to grow.

But when we look at individual schools, we see that there are kids everywhere whose school curriculum is not matching their academic needs. We see kids who could be challenged more. We wanted to find a better way to identify those students who, when given the opportunity, could really excel but may not meet those national norms.

Friends don't let friends use national norms for gifted identification. [...] You're just going to perpetuate disparities.

What were you expecting MAP Growth data to reveal about gifted kids? Were you surprised by any of the findings?

I was expecting to see some inequity. But two things surprised me.

One was that a relatively simple change in how we identify gifted students resulted in huge gains in the numbers and types of students who were identified. We had a much more equitable representation of students.

The second thing was the effect of that threshold change in different schools. In a school with an average proportion of minority students, the benefits of changing the reference group were not as big. In the schools where there were larger proportions of students from African American or Hispanic backgrounds, however, we were seeing huge bumps. It was frustrating to see that our schools are more segregated than we like to think.

What recommendations do you have for legislators as well as school and district-level administrators based on your research?

One of the taglines we talk about with this study is, Friends don't let friends use national norms for gifted identification. It's just bad practice. You're just going to perpetuate disparities.

Also, all of us—legislators, administrators, everyone—need to stop thinking of the US as one big, homogeneous group. Let's capture the heterogeneity and find the kids who need us, the kids who aren't well served by the standard curriculum.

Finally, if you're at the school or district level, don't wait for legislation to change. Reset the threshold for gifted education in your school or district.

“We need to shift [the] conception of what education is supposed to do. There shouldn’t be a mismatch between the classroom curriculum and what a kid needs.”

What are some of the barriers policymakers typically face when trying to address inequity in gifted education?

I think there’s this perception that gifted students are going to be okay and that we don’t have to do anything to make sure their education is meeting their academic needs. But every kid deserves to have a quality education.

I also think there’s a perception that there maybe aren’t very many of them, so why worry? When we adjust the comparison group to other students in their school, though, we see that’s not true at all. There are actually a lot more gifted (or maybe a better term is “academically advanced”) children than we think, and they all need to be served.

Clearly your research is helping schools and districts change how they identify students for gifted programs. What do you think the impact will be on students?

One immediate outcome should be that we have better representation, that the students who are getting served by gifted programs look more like the population of students who live in the United States.

Could you say more about how the federal definition of giftedness might be a lever for policymakers or advocacy organizations to call on the use of these building-level or local norms?

It’s such a powerful definition. It’s so clear. “Children and youth with outstanding talents and performance show potential for performing at remarkably high levels of

accomplishment when compared to others of their age, experience, or environment.”

The Department of Education is telling us, without being explicit, to consider local norms in identifying students for services. We’re finding it’s actually not that hard to implement the change in the reference group we’re advocating for when we remind people that the federal norms allow for it.

In the study, you talk a bit about political blowback reported from districts where parents whose children are white, Asian American, or upper income worry they may lose services if norms are changed. How might a school or district mitigate some of that blowback?

Well, if it were up to me, we would start worrying less about the label “gifted” and more about meeting the academic needs of a wide range of students. We tend to focus too much on that label when it’s not about that at all. It’s about making sure every student is given the maximal opportunity to grow. We need to shift teachers’ and administrators’ and parents’ conception of what education is supposed to do. There shouldn’t be a mismatch between the classroom curriculum and what a kid needs.

Read the entire study findings in [AERA Open](#). And learn more about gifted education in the US in [“Gifted education in America is finally moving past its legacy of inequality.”](#) **TLG**

About our authors



Christine Pitts

Christine Pitts, policy advisor at NWEA, is an educator, leader, and researcher by training. She collaborates with researchers, policymakers, and state leaders to study and advocate for policies that advance equity in education. Her policy research focuses on elevating diverse stakeholder narratives through network analysis and mixed methods research. Dr. Pitts earned her PhD from the University of Oregon and previously worked as a teacher and school administrator.



Erin Ryan

Erin Ryan joined NWEA as senior writer in 2018. Her way with words and passion for helping kids have met in unexpected ways. She earned a master's degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin, then taught second grade at a STEM-focused magnet school in northern Florida. She later shifted to creative writing, dreaming up children's books, greeting cards, and digital content. She also worked in solutions journalism, focusing on equity, education, and small—but impactful—ways to change the world. At NWEA, she continues doing just that.



Aaliyahh Samuel

A lifelong educator, Aaliyahh Samuel has put equity at the heart of her work creating partnerships and influencing state policies grounded in data, research, and best practices. She earned her doctoral degree in organizational leadership from Nova Southeastern University, focusing on effective literacy interventions for children in primary grades. She previously led education policy programs at the National Governors Association and First Things First, a statewide organization to fund early education and health programs. Dr. Samuel joined NWEA in 2018 and is the executive vice president of government affairs and partnerships. In 2019, she was appointed as a fellow to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.



Melissa Stadtfeld

Melissa Stadtfeld joined NWEA in 2019 as a strategic account manager. She's served as a teacher, campus administrator, and district administrator in large K-12 districts, where she provided leadership in curriculum development, standards alignment, and assessment literacy. Melissa is passionate about supporting educators in connecting actionable data to frameworks that improve outcomes for students.



Beth Tarasawa

As executive vice president of research at NWEA, Beth Tarasawa leads a talented team of researchers devoted to transforming education research through advancements in assessment, growth measurement, and the availability of longitudinal data. She also collaborates with universities, foundations, and school districts to produce rigorous and accessible education policy research. Dr. Tarasawa's research focuses on issues related to educational equity, particularly those concerning social class, race, and linguistic diversity. She completed a PhD in sociology of education with a concentration in education policy at Emory University.

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