Pennsylvania’s Consolidated State Plan notes that the Pennsylvania Department of Education “... believes that all students deserve equitable access to well-rounded, rigorous, and personalized education that sparks curiosity, builds confidence, and helps them prepare for long-term success.”

We created this eBook to provide you with helpful strategies to improve equity in the classroom to ensure every student succeeds and thrives in school, career, and beyond.

This eBook includes the following chapters:

1. Using Personalized Learning to Promote Educational Equity
2. How to Create Inclusive Classrooms: Practical Strategies for Teaching Diverse Students
3. How to Help the Rising Number of English Learners Succeed in School
4. Relationships Matter: Advice for Working with Low-Income Students
Using Personalized Learning to Promote Educational Equity
Using Personalized Learning to Promote Educational Equity

Educators across the country are striving to promote equity in their classrooms and schools. Personalized learning is one strategy that helps in this effort by meeting all students where they are and providing the tools they need to master each subject. This individualized approach goes a long way in classrooms where achievement gaps exist between high- and low-income students, gifted students and individuals with special needs, and students with and without family support.

The positive impact of personalized learning can extend beyond the classroom walls. Entire schools and districts have witnessed the effect that personalized learning can have on heightening student engagement, reducing the dropout rate, and increasing school accountability. As we work toward promoting equity in education, it’s important to look at the impact of personalized learning on the classroom, the school, and the school system as a whole.

Equity in the classroom

Every classroom teacher knows the struggle of engaging a variety of students with widely different strengths, needs, and interests. A traditional lesson, such as writing a report on an assigned book, may meet the learning needs of some students while missing those of others. A student who has already mastered these skills might coast through the assignment and miss an opportunity to be challenged, while a student who struggles with reading skills may be so overwhelmed that he or she becomes frustrated and ultimately gives up. This scenario illustrates a common quandary: How can educators ensure that students with different learning needs are not lost in the shuffle?

Personalized learning allows educators to engage every student at every level. At Nashville Big Picture High School, educators create foundational concepts and objectives for their classes but also offer students “a voice and a choice” in their learning. For example, in Derick Richardson’s math class, a lesson on profit function and quadratic equations became an interactive group activity. Students formed groups and created fictitious businesses, culminating in a grade-level presentation emulating the popular show Shark Tank. Since students saw the real-world applications of what they were learning and had a voice in their learning projects, student engagement was high. According to Richardson, “Everybody got involved, even the kids that are not good at math. I’ve never seen these kids get this excited about a math project.” By offering students the freedom to design their own personalized learning opportunities, Richardson was able to engage students of all ability levels in the lesson.

Equity in the school

When personalized learning is adopted by an entire school, the effects on student engagement and achievement are even more striking. At Nashville Big Picture High School, educators form personal relationships with their students to identify how each individual learns and what they need to know. Then, the educators empower students to follow their passions and find real-world applications for their studies. As a result, students graduate with the self-knowledge of who they are as learners and what interests drive their work. In the words of Big Picture’s principal, Chaerea Snorten, “The whole focus of personalized learning is that students see the relevance of what it is that they’re doing. The outcome is students are engaged, and they’re enjoying the learning process.”
Personalized learning has also been shown to slow the high school dropout rate by helping students stay in school through graduation. For example, as of 2012, Mascenic Regional High School in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, was able to maintain a 0% dropout rate for two consecutive years thanks to personalized learning. The high school revamped its teaching techniques to allow more one-on-one time, flexible teaching options, and individual attention from the faculty. Principal Trevor Courtney described the school’s personalized approach to helping each student graduate thusly: “We have all these different students that are trying to get through one little door. Let’s make more doors, try to open that up, breathe some more life into the curriculum.” This innovative approach illustrates how personalized learning can address each student’s individual needs while still encouraging all learners to reach the same goal (graduation).

**Equity in the education system**

The effects of personalized learning are gaining notice from education leaders as well. With the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), individual states and districts have more control over students’ learning than was afforded under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). KnowledgeWorks created a side-by-side comparison of ESSA and NCLB that demonstrates how the new law helps school districts move toward personalized learning. For example, ESSA gives schools the opportunity to change the way they assess their students—using a pilot demonstration program, schools can deliver assessments that give a detailed picture of how every student performs. Additionally, the Direct Student Services authorized by ESSA can be used to help meet the needs of struggling students. These provisions encourage schools to choose personalized-learning techniques and, in turn, create a more equitable environment for their students.

Considering the considerable potential for promoting educational equity, it’s no surprise that personalized learning is gaining traction in the education community. From individual educators all the way up to the leaders behind the ESSA, we are recognizing the wide range of students out there, along with the potential for each to become a lifelong learner. By meeting students where they are and tapping into their individual interests and motivations, we can empower every learner to succeed in school. By applying a personalized learning approach, the dream of creating a responsive, engaging, equitable learning environment can become a reality.
How to Create Inclusive Classrooms: Practical Strategies for Teaching Diverse Students
A quick look at the mission statements for school districts across the United States reveals a common goal: to help all types of students succeed. In Los Angeles, for example, the city’s school district promises that all teachers and staff “believe in the equal worth and dignity of all students and are committed to educate all students to their maximum potential.” In St. Paul, Minnesota, public schools, the mission statement is simple yet broad: “to provide a premier education for all.”

It makes sense that public school districts would seek to embrace diversity—after all, the nation’s population is changing fast. Within a few decades, researchers expect that the U.S. will become a “plurality nation,” meaning no one ethnic or racial group will constitute a majority. This will be especially true for the nation’s children, who are expected to represent a broader swath of backgrounds than ever before by the year 2018.

Now and in the future, it seems clear that teachers will need not only mission statements about teaching diverse group of students, but practical strategies for doing so successfully. Fortunately, some excellent approaches are emerging. Here’s a look at some of the highlights:

**Empathy matters**

Psychologist and project-based learning proponent Thom Markham recently wrote an essay for the education blog Mindshift, a project of San Francisco’s KQED public radio station. In an essay titled “Why Empathy Holds the Key to Transforming 21st Century Learning,” Markham listed the many reasons empathy may be an essential tool in today’s classrooms and described empathy as the “fundamental glue that holds humanity together.” He contended that helping students practice empathy and making sure it is included in the curriculum is important in part because empathy has the ability to “unite” students in a world that is becoming more global all the time. Drawing upon his psychology background, Markham promoted student-led projects that require collaboration and group work, thereby encouraging students to continually work at getting along and understanding one another.

**Relationship-based learning**

For P.S. 89 in New York City, the secret to success lay in creating classrooms with more of a family feel. Also featured on KQED’s Mindshift blog, the public school’s staff embraced the idea that all students are indeed different and worthy of special attention. As KQED’s Katrina Schwartz reported, keeping class sizes low through a co-teaching model that puts both a special education teacher and a general education teacher in each classroom facilitates more focus and connection between the staff and students. This connection—in which students are seen and heard—has led to improved academic outcomes, with one parent reporting that her daughter who once deeply disliked school is now on the honor roll.
Concrete classroom strategies

At a 2015 conference on effective teaching for college-level instructors, Stanford computer science lecturer Cynthia Lee shared a list she had created called, “What can I do today to create a more inclusive community in computer science?” The list, which was full of practical strategies and targeted to busy new teachers, caught on like wildfire, and some have argued that its “actionable items” could be applied in all kinds of classrooms.

Drawing upon the fact that women and minorities have long been underrepresented and even absent from the computer science field, Lee put together her list out of a desire to change that, but as the nation’s classrooms undergo a rapid shift in population, her recommendations could have an impact far beyond her field. One tip? Encourage students to focus on their “slope,” or growth, and not their “y-intercept,” or the “advantages or deficiencies” they started with.” Another? Provide students with “clear and timely feedback,” as those traditionally excluded from academic success tend to worry and fear the worst.

There is no one way to address the increasing diversity present in classrooms throughout the United States, but following the examples of the teachers and researchers working to build relationships and actively reach out to all students may be a good place to start.
How to Help the Rising Number of English Learners Succeed in School
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In classrooms across the United States, there is a growing number of English learners (ELs)—students who need support in order to become proficient in English—and their numbers have been rising steadily since at least 2000, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Per the center’s data, just over 9 percent of all K–12 students qualify for EL services today, although this number is closer to 30 percent in states like California. While the vast majority of ELs were born in the United States and are native Spanish speakers, many schools serve students who speak an array of other languages at home, from Arabic to Haitian Creole. One thing is for sure: ELs are a diverse group.

Under the EL umbrella, there are myriad stories of students who lack adequate access to challenging coursework. A 2017 report by Claudio Sanchez of National Public Radio found that just 2 percent of ELs are identified as gifted, compared to 7 percent of their native English-speaker counterparts. And as Sanchez reported, the inequity doesn’t stop there; in fact, researchers have found that “even when EL students are identified as gifted, the impulse is often to keep them out of accelerated programs despite evidence that they would benefit from more challenging work while they’re learning English.” In other words, there is a tendency to exclude EL students from content-driven work until their English language skills are considered strong enough.

An Education Week piece similarly highlighted this discrepancy by acknowledging that the skills many EL students possess—including how many “translate for their parents” while also “decoding in two languages all the time,” in the words of one Oklahoma administrator—do not fit into the way students are traditionally considered gifted. Being slotted into advanced or gifted classes has typically been based on one’s English language skills, which may be partly because EL instruction is a still-evolving field of study and practice. Indeed, National Public Radio’s Sanchez noted that well over half of all states have reported a shortage of qualified EL teachers. While only a relatively small number of students (both native English-speakers and ELs) end up in gifted programs, a greater proportion of ELs are at risk of staying “stuck in academically segregated programs where they fall behind in basic subjects,” according to Sanchez’s research.

This situation can present a problem when it comes to preparing EL students for college. A post by educators Kristina Robertson and Susan LaFond on the EL-focused website Colorin Colorado made this point: “The challenge of helping ELs get on the path to college is one that many educators are already familiar with; given current demographic trends, however, it is a challenge that more and more schools around the country will face as the nation continues to diversify.” Just as gifted programs may need to evolve and become more inclusive, college prep courses might need to do the same. As it stands, EL students are less likely to graduate from high school on time (63 percent, compared to 82 percent for native English-speakers), far less likely to take the ACT and other college entrance exams (less than 2 percent), and much less likely to both enroll in and graduate from college.
So, now that the problem has been clearly identified, what are some of the solutions? Robertson and LaFond offered an extensive list of some key ways to support EL students on their journey to postsecondary educational opportunities. For example, they recommended that EL teachers embrace their role as advocates who may know their students “better than anyone else in the building.” From there, teachers can help students identify and work toward individualized goals by having high expectations for all and not allowing EL students to receive different or lesser forms of encouragement than their native English-speaking peers. Additionally, Robertson and LaFond made it clear that ELs “need to enroll in demanding courses that will prepare them for college.” Still, some students may need five years of high school in order to stay on track for college. Moreover, some may gain more confidence in their own abilities by taking an AP Spanish class if they are native Spanish-speakers, for instance.

Gaining access to more challenging courses can be beneficial for EL students, even those who are not yet proficient in English. Jennifer Pust, who teaches high school in California, provided a detailed look at how to help ELs succeed in demanding AP classes—a situation she was called to address when her school decided to encourage all students to take such classes. Pust found that the strategies she had “used in courses for struggling readers and writers could be adapted to meet the needs of [her] new AP students.” Building on her knowledge of how to help struggling readers grasp advanced content, Pust began including such techniques as “think-alouds,” reading workshops, and modeling how to respond to essay prompts. In a piece she penned for the National Writing Project, Pust also presented a variety of other strategies for interested teachers, including a nudge to “expand the canon” by including books that “reflect students’ linguistic and cultural heritage.”

The U.S. Department of Education also has resources available for EL teachers, and the main thrust of its guidelines appears to center on an important idea: that EL students need to be appropriately supported and challenged while at school. More specifically, they should not be segregated into separate and unequal classes or programs that may not be adequately preparing them for success in school or college. Indeed, a government-published toolkit for working with EL students makes mention of many of the issues touched upon here, including the low number of EL students who are enrolled in either gifted or AP classes. This toolkit, which offers a helpful framework for educators and administrators, includes equity-based questions that focus on whether assessments and classes are being adjusted to tap into EL students’ particular strengths and challenges. One of the government’s recommendations is to ensure that students are immersed in “literacy-rich school environments” that both honor their roots and help them gain meaningful experience in English, thereby helping them move forward into bright and fulfilling futures.
Relationships Matter: Advice for Working with Low-Income Students
It’s no secret that poverty impacts a child’s chances for success in school. Today, the majority of students in many teachers’ classrooms come from families with limited economic means. In fact, in 2015, the majority of public school students in the United States (just over 50 percent) qualified for free and reduced lunch at school, according to federal income guidelines.

This means teachers must be skilled at working with these children and be aware of the concerns affecting them, such as housing and food insecurity.

It is important to acknowledge that children living in poverty will encounter a number of challenges on the road to academic success. In a book titled Teaching with Poverty in Mind, writer Eric Jensen does not shy away from these realities. “Many (low-income) children face emotional and social instability,” Jensen reminds readers. He characterizes such instability as often including “inadequate health care” and limited access to positive interactions with adult caregivers.

Jensen goes on to provide a list of specific difficulties faced by parents and children living in less stable economic conditions, such as living in unsafe neighborhoods where children tend to “spend less time playing outdoors and more time watching television,” making them “less likely to participate in after-school activities.” This situation can contrast starkly with that of wealthier students, who often enjoy far greater access to emotionally, physically, and intellectually stimulating environments. Still, as the Economic Policy Institute pointed out in a 2015 paper on the achievement rates of children in poverty, “some children with severe socioeconomic disadvantages achieve at higher levels than typical children without them.”

But how?

What school-based activities and approaches can teachers use to bring out the best in students, many of whom are clustered in Title 1 schools and may have limited access to resource-rich support systems? Step one, in the eyes of many researchers, is to develop relationships. Cynthia Johnson, writing for the Association for Middle Level Education website, makes this important point: “Building relationships is often considered a ‘soft’ principle and is often overlooked when devising strategies to educate children who live in poverty. However, effective educators know building relationships is a crucial step before introducing content.”
The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent nonprofit, known as the IDRA, that focuses on “strengthening and transforming” public education through such avenues as policy analysis and “innovative materials and programs.” The IDRA also has an action framework available on its website for those who work with low-income students. This framework is based on research that includes student input and is designed to help school professionals understand how best to work with and support students living in poverty.

The first item on the IDRA’s framework connects to the idea that relationships are essential by making the point that students thrive in schools where there are “professional relationships that promote trust and cooperation.” According to the organization, this means both students and teachers work in a supportive environment and are “involved in accomplishing the goals of the school and of the community.” Additionally, the IDRA found that the relationship between schools and the families of low-income students is a very important ingredient in helping students succeed, and noted that this is best accomplished when there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and “shared power.”

The IDRA also found that factors such as small class sizes, “access to quality curriculum,” and after-school enrichment opportunities all made a difference in how students from low-income families progressed through grades K–12. Relationships, of course, are only one aspect of making school a productive, positive experience for students who may be struggling with the stresses of living in poverty.
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