

Reviewing Education Policies to Advance Equity



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Note: The authors names are placed in alphabetical order to represent an equal level of authorship.

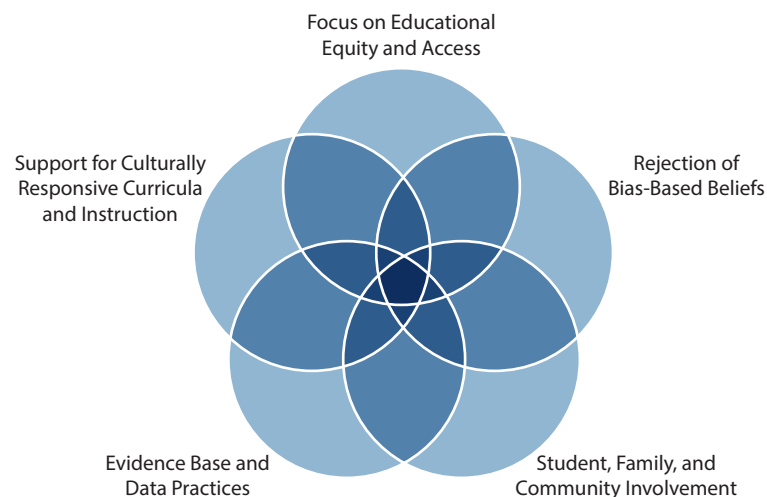
Education policies serve as potent tools for advancing equitable outcomes and systematically addressing inequities in schools and districts. Policies are crafted, implemented, and evaluated by individuals whose perspectives are shaped by systemic norms, personal values, beliefs, and goals (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2021). In addition, schools and districts exist within localities and systems that often contend with entrenched racism, which frequently perpetuates the status quo. Consequently, education policies often mirror inequalities, inequities, and bias-based beliefs within the K–12 education system. Increasing educational equity is key to overcoming the status quo and improving educational outcomes for historically disenfranchised students in K–12 public education.

WestEd’s approach to [Systemic Equity Reviews](#) hinges on the fundamental principle that commitments alone are not sufficient for achieving educational equity—there must also be tangible changes in policies and practices (Hernández et al., 2022). Accordingly, the Systemic Equity Review (SER) team at WestEd developed the SER Policy Review Protocol, which is a tool to support schools, districts, and state education agencies in examining and assessing how equitable their education policies are. The tool is framed around five critical equity domains that education practitioners can use to evaluate policies (see Figure 1):

1. Focus on educational equity and access
2. Rejection of bias-based beliefs
3. Student, family, and community involvement
4. Evidence base and data practices
5. Support for culturally responsive–sustaining education

Each domain is grounded in extensive research (Bryk, 2010; Chicago Beyond, 2019; Fergus, 2017; Gregory et al., 2017; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; National Equity Project, n.d.; Khalifa, 2018; Powell & Cantrell, 2021). In particular, this tool focuses on culturally responsive–sustaining education, which is an approach to advancing equity in education by creating culturally affirming and inclusive learning environments and experiences that support the attainment of comparably positive outcomes for all student groups. Weaving together rigor and relevance, culturally responsive–sustaining education involves making substantive connections between students’ identities, cultures, and lived experiences and the content and skills they learn in school—and doing so in ways that support cultural pluralism rather than cultural assimilation (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Figure 1. Policy Review Protocol: Five Equity Domains



This brief explores five critical equity domains—as seen in WestEd’s SER Policy Review Protocol—that education practitioners can use to evaluate policies.

Unveiling Systemic Inequities: The Framework

Unfortunately, in the policymaking process, after a policy is implemented we often do not evaluate whether it is producing the desired equitable outcomes. The SER Policy Review Protocol enables educators and administrators to evaluate the key equity domains of a policy, with implementation and outcomes in mind.

Domain 1. Focus on Educational Equity and Access

The domain of educational equity and access focuses on evaluating whether policies ensure that students have what they need (National Equity Project, n.d.); provide a numerical/measurable framing of equity (Fergus, 2017); take a humanizing approach that prioritizes the well-being and social-emotional needs of students, families, and staff (Khalifa, 2018); and use precise language about the causes, impacts, and solutions to educational inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pollock & Pollock, 2008). Given the broad range of formalized policies that are used to inform and guide educator practice, each of these elements should be considered when developing or reviewing any given policy. Below are explanations of each of the subdomains of educational equity and access.

Organizational equity priorities and mission

Achieving equity requires a systemic approach. Therefore, policies should align with the core elements of the stated mission or vision of each state, division, district, school, or program (whichever level is relevant to scope of policy review) related to educational equity, inclusion, justice, and access. Without this alignment, education systems are in danger of creating equity initiatives that are siloed and lack coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Unique student needs

All education communities are composed of people with diverse identities, experiences, cultures, goals, and needs. As such, education policies should state where and how educators should gather information regarding these differences. Policies should also be adjusted to ensure they are responsive to the needs of any individual student, family, or group within the education community. This means placing student, family, and staff needs at the center of policy development. Addressing the unique needs of students is particularly important for policies that impact academic materials and instruction, behavior in classrooms and schools, special education, student placement, and hiring/retention.

Numerical/measurable component of equity

Equity requires measurable shifts in educational inputs in ways that positively impact student outcomes and experiences. Accordingly, equitable policies should include clear language and metrics (where relevant) about the shifts in systems and practices needed to achieve the desired outcomes and how those shifts will be measured.

For instance, policies that are directly tied to strategic planning goals aimed at addressing inequities (as all policies should be) should reflect that commitment by explaining the shifts toward equity and culturally responsive and sustaining education that will be made to achieve those goals. In addition, all metrics and goals for these policies should be disaggregated by student groups (e.g., increase 4-year graduation rate for Black/African American students by 10%). This means avoiding writing aggregate goals (e.g., increase the 4-year graduation rate from 80% to 90%). Metrics and goals should also be written to capture decreases and eliminations in disparities, which means avoiding goals in which disparities are maintained, such as a goal to decrease behavioral referrals within each student group by 10%.

Humanizing component of equity

In addition to ensuring that disparities in student outcomes are addressed, policies focused on educational equity should ensure that students' and families' social, emotional, and cultural needs are met by schools. Policies should ensure that students' and families' cultures, languages, identities, and abilities are explicitly validated in ways that sustain their cultural and linguistic practices (Paris, 2012) as full members of the educational community. Additionally, relevant policies should include approaches to gathering information from students on their experiences in school (e.g., Safir & Dugan, 2021), centering these data alongside information about student outcomes (e.g., grades, test scores, disciplinary referrals). The connectedness, belonging, and sense of social-emotional safety of those most impacted by inequitable education systems should be prioritized alongside academic outcomes. For example, policies can promote the following practices:

- » Empathy interviews: One-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged needs (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020)
- » Culturally responsive classroom walkthroughs: A way to assess how culturally responsive elements are incorporated into educators' teaching and practice (Rosario et al., 2024)
- » Home visits: Visits to students' homes, with permission and consent, to get a deeper understanding of their "cultural wealth, assets, hopes, dreams, and fears" (Safir & Dugan, 2019)
- » Shadowing a student: Following a student throughout their day to gain deeper understanding into their experiences

Precision regarding educational equity

Where relevant, all policies—particularly those aimed at identifying and addressing inequities—should guide educators to implement them in ways that explicitly account for the forms of systemic oppression and/or bias (e.g., racism, ableism, sexism, English-only language bias) that negatively impact students, families, and staff. For example,

- » policies guiding the collection and review of data should require and support disaggregation of data;
- » family engagement policies should ensure culturally and linguistically responsive communication;
- » multi-tiered systems of support, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and response to intervention, should address racial and other forms of bias and stereotypes; and
- » relevant human resource policies should address how to deal with microaggressions.

Domain 2. Rejection of Bias-Based Beliefs

This domain evaluates the extent to which policies, regulations, and resource allocation reflect approaches grounded in various forms of bias (Fergus, 2017; Milner, 2020).

When considering whether and how bias-based beliefs are reflected within any policy, educators should consider the extent to which forms of bias are *explicitly reflected*, *implicitly reflected*, or *explicitly countered* (Hollie & Allen, 2018) in the policy. Examples of these terms include the following:

- » **Explicitly Reflected:** A code of conduct that punishes students for certain types of head-gear, such as a hair wrap.
 - » Biases explicitly reflected in this policy: color-evasiveness, stereotypes
- » **Implicitly Reflected:** A plan to address disproportionality in school discipline by focusing on social-emotional learning.
 - » Biases implicitly reflected in this plan: deficit thinking, stereotypes. The plan's focus implies that the over-suspension or over-referral of certain groups of students is due to those groups having disproportionately low social-emotional development.
- » **Explicitly Countered:** Recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retention plans that explicitly focus on diversifying the workforce and addressing various forms of bias (e.g., microaggressions) that impact retention and workplace satisfaction.
 - » Bias explicitly countered in these plans: color-evasiveness

Table 1 describes three common forms of bias-based beliefs and the various traits associated with them, adapted from the work of Fergus (Fergus, 2017, p. 209) and Milner (Milner, 2020, p. 21–63).

Table 1. Common forms of bias-based beliefs

Type of bias-based belief	Description of bias-based belief	Checklist of bias-based belief traits
<p>Color-evasiveness</p>	<p>This is a belief that promotes the idea that the best way to remove racism is to omit race, gender, and other social identities as descriptors. This belief involves treating individuals as individuals, without considering their social identities. It focuses on discussing and framing the commonalities between individuals. The default identity in this ideology is Whiteness.</p> <p>Those who adhere to this ideology see race as a taboo topic that is irrelevant and inconsequential to the success of students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Omits mention or discussion of social identities that differ from White, male, and/or heterosexual. » Insists on framing that focuses on people’s commonalities rather than recognizing and understanding their differences.
<p>Deficit thinking</p>	<p>This is an ideology used to explain academic performance, and at times cognitive abilities, as a result of deficiencies within a cultural group. It minimizes the influence of systemic patterns on abilities and behaviors.</p> <p>Those who adhere to this ideology have a narrow view of what it means to be “normal” or “successful.” This view is based on their own cultural references, which may be inconsistent with others. They do not believe that culturally diverse students are capable of a rigorous academic curriculum, so they provide unchallenging learning opportunities in the classroom.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Blames cultural group for abilities and behaviors. » Does not acknowledge systemic problems. » Creates and/or supports stereotypes of cultural groups.

Type of bias-based belief	Description of bias-based belief	Checklist of bias-based belief traits
Poverty disciplining	<p>This biased view believes that changing the behavior and thinking of individuals experiencing poverty is paramount to fixing their low-income condition.</p> <p>Those who adhere to this ideology believe that people are rewarded (solely or mostly) on their ability, performance, effort, and talents. In this view, people believe that some students just do not have the aptitude, ability, or skills for success and that the “system” has nothing to do with academic achievement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Insists on changing behavior and psychological dispositions. » Believes that disciplining promotes “good citizenship” behaviors.

In addition to these three common forms of bias-based beliefs, equitable policies should be free of any forms of stereotypes, which are widely held and oversimplified images or ideas of particular individuals or groups that are rooted in racism, sexism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, classism, and other biases (Gregory et al., 2017).

Domain 3. Student, Family, and Community Involvement

This next domain¹ evaluates the extent to which students, families, and the broader education community have a meaningful hand in policy development. This domain also evaluates whether each policy is reflective of the perspectives or voices of students, families, and/or the broader education community. In order to disrupt traditional power structures related to the development and implementation of education policies, district and school leaders should intentionally search for opportunities to center the voices of students, families, and the community (MPHI & The Implementation Group, 2019; Race Forward et al., n.d.).

Student voice

Although students are the group most affected by the majority of school, district, and state policies, they often have no input in the creation, implementation, or evaluation of those policies (Conner et al., 2015). Students are asked to be active participants in their education but they are rarely provided opportunities to actively participate in creating and affecting the parameters that shape their education, depriving them of agency as well as opportunities for collaboration and learning. Student voice should be a critical part of developing education policy.

¹ This domain is derived from Bryk et al., 2010.

Resources for Centering Student Voice

There are a variety of ways to involve students in the policy process at the school, district, and state levels (Powell et al., 2024). The following resources provide some relevant strategies:

- » The Center on PBIS has developed [a framework to use as a guide](#) for involving students in the creation of a school or district behavioral policy.
- » [Elevating Student Voice in Education](#), a report by the Center for American Progress, discusses a variety of strategies for involving student voices at the school, district, and state levels.
- » Youth-Participatory Action Research, or Y-PAR, builds students' capacity and self-efficacy to be education advocates for themselves and their peers while engaging in critical thinking, problem solving, and research skills. The [Y-PAR Hub at the University of California, Berkeley](#), offers a number of relevant resources.

Family voice and community involvement

Like student voice, the education policy design process is not generally set up to include and prioritize family and community voice. Parents are often asked to help implement and explain school and district policies to their children, but are not often involved in the creation of policy. Including families in policy development benefits students, families, and schools because families are central to their children's education, and homes are a central learning location in children's lives. Similarly, community members and organizations are often left out of the policy conversation entirely even though schools exist within communities and the people and organizations that make up each community have policy preferences and resources and knowledge to offer.

With thoughtful planning and meaningful engagement strategies, families and communities can be involved in policy creation from the state level to the classroom. We Are Beloved's [The Student and Family Engagement Spectrum](#) tool offers a framework for evaluating values and orientation toward family and community involvement; reflection questions; and suggested activities to move toward meaningful engagement.

Domain 4. Evidence Base and Data Practices

This domain evaluates a policy's research base and inclusive data practices, including its evidence-based implementation strategy and rationale, data-collection practices, data-dissemination practices, and data-use and data-access practices.

Evidence-based implementation strategy and rationale

If educators and administrators spend the time and energy to create and enforce a policy, there should be a strong rationale for why it was created. In addition, there should be a clear research base to support the need for the policy, its substance, and the guidance for implementing it. The policy should also reflect strategies that are effective for the student groups affected (Klingner & Edwards, 2006).

Data-collection practices

Equitable policies should be explicit about how and when data should be collected, by whom, and with what valid and reliable instruments (Jawetz et al., 2021). Students, families, and community members who will be affected by the policy and data collection should be involved in the data-collection planning and process (Chicago Beyond, 2019).

Data dissemination practices

There are equity considerations for how data are reported as well as to whom they are reported. Policies should specify how data are to be aggregated and reported by social identity. Policies should also be explicit in their instruction to report data back to the communities affected by the collection and reporting of the data.

Data use and transparency

Policies should be clear about who can access (Equitable Data Working Group, 2022) and use the data in question. Policies should also provide a clear and compelling rationale for any restrictions.

Domain 5. Support for Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education

This domain evaluates the extent to which the policy, regulation, and resource allocation includes specific commitments to culturally responsive and sustaining education and the extent to which it supports teachers, leaders, and staff in implementing culturally responsive and sustaining education. Core components of culturally responsive and sustaining education include the following (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; New York State Education Department, n.d.):

- » **Fosters positive academic outcomes.** Ensures that educators and educational experiences contribute to an individual's engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking that supports the development of academic skills and understanding of academic concepts.
- » **Affirms culture, race, and identity.** Includes elements that affirm culture, race, and identity by building on the knowledge and cultural assets that students bring with them to the classroom.

- » **Builds cultural competence.** Includes an element of building cultural competence in the classroom so that students both learn about and develop pride in their own and others' cultures.
- » **Builds critical consciousness.** Includes an element of building critical consciousness through the process of explicitly unmasking and unmaking oppressive systems through the critique of discourses of power.

These domains prove useful when evaluating policy to assess and promote equity. As depicted in Figure 1, they frequently overlap and are not employed individually but rather simultaneously throughout the policy evaluation process. Developing an evaluation process in which the domains work together to foster equity requires some time and practice.

In the Case Study section below, we use the SER Policy Review Protocol domains to evaluate a commonly found school/district policy. This case study illustrates how to enhance equity by using the tool to evaluate and modify policy based on findings.

Case Study: Dress Code Policy Evaluation

The following dress code policy is taken from a current code of conduct in an anonymous school district in the United States.

The district's dress code guidelines state the following:

- » Students' dress should be modest (cleavage and midribs covered) with no visible undergarments.
- » Shorts, skirts, and dresses must be no shorter than four (4) inches above the knee.
- » Holes in pants must be at or below the knee only.
- » Pants/shorts/skirts must be worn at the waist.
- » Shoes must be worn at all times.
- » Heads must be uncovered at all times except in cases of health or religious requirements. Bandanas, hats, wraps, scarves, durags, wave caps, hoods, etc. are NOT PERMITTED to be worn.

A closer look at this standard dress code policy reveals inherent biases and inequities. Applying the domains of the SER Policy Review Protocol illuminates areas for improvement, as described below.

Focus on Educational Equity and Access

The policy restricts student expression and cultural awareness by imposing limitations on clothing options and prohibiting cultural expression, representation, and protective style options such as head wraps, worn by many communities of color

(Barrett, 2018; Davidson, 2022; National Women’s Law Center, 2018; National Women’s Law Center, 2019; Pavlakis & Roegman, 2018; Pendharkar, 2022). Stringent policies such as this one often create arbitrary reasons to remove students from classrooms, and they disproportionately impact girls, queer students, and communities of color, thus limiting those students’ access to education (Barrett, 2018; Davidson, 2022; National Women’s Law Center, 2018; National Women’s Law Center, 2019; Pavlakis & Roegman, 2018; Pendharkar, 2022).

Rejection of Bias-Based Beliefs

Bias is perpetuated through inequitable targeting based on gender and cultural practices. The portion of the policy that states “Students’ dress should be modest (cleavage and midribs covered) ...” inequitably targets female and female-presenting bodies, which suggests that girls’ bodies are somehow inherently distracting or immodest, a bias-based belief. Here the word *modest* is a poorly defined and subjective term. Without a general definition of “modest,” staff are implicitly directed to identify girls and girls’ bodies as inappropriate and immodest based on their dress.

Instead of this: “Students’ dress should be modest (cleavage and midribs covered) ...”

Try: “All students should have their buttocks, genitals, and nipples covered at school.”

Note: Reproduced from Equality Florida (n.d.).

Student, Family, and Community Involvement

There is a lack of both evidence and documentation indicating community involvement in the policy creation process. If, in fact, the district did not engage students, families, or the community when creating this policy, that omits perspectives from communities that possess a wealth of knowledge and have the potential to shed light on biases that may be present, increase equity, foster community via shared understanding, and contribute to culturally responsive–sustaining educational practices.

Evidence Base and Data Practices

There is no evidence that indicates that strict dress code enforcement improves safety or academic rigor. However, evidence indicates that historically disenfranchised communities are disproportionately impacted by policies such as this (Barrett, 2018; Davidson, 2022; National Women’s Law Center, 2018; National Women’s Law Center, 2019; Pavlakis & Roegman, 2018; Pendharkar, 2022).

Support for Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education

Culturally responsive–sustaining education begins with culturally responsive and sustaining school practices. One way to examine culturally responsive–sustaining practices is to examine the ways in which students can express themselves (Anderson & Cowart, 2012). The dress code policy limits student expression by preventing students from wearing culturally relevant head coverings. This not only limits cultural expression, but also limits cultural awareness in the school community by not allowing room for understanding why these coverings are worn.

Next Steps

Often, violating a code of conduct such as this dress code leads to a student being suspended or otherwise missing classroom time. Denying students access to an appropriate educational setting because of their clothing is inequitable. Evaluating the dress code policy using the domains of the SER Policy Review Protocol brought this inequity to light. It is imperative to employ the Policy Review Protocol to discern if, why, and how a policy may perpetuate inequity and uphold the status quo. It is also crucial to leverage the evidence gathered through the tool to scrutinize whom the policy might be discriminating against and to what extent and why.

However, it is not sufficient to merely identify that a policy is inequitable. Educators and administrators also need to adopt a critical lens to actively reject bias-based beliefs. For instance, to help mitigate biased policies, students, families, and community members need to be included in the policy writing and evaluation process. In addition, the policy should be revised based on the findings from the policy review. Furthermore, policy decisions should be substantiated by evidence, data, and a commitment to engaging in culturally responsive and sustaining educational and policy practices. This type of comprehensive approach to evaluating policies is paramount for fostering educational equity and ensuring that policies contribute positively to the diverse needs and experiences of all students.

Conclusion

Utilizing the SER Policy Review Protocol not only streamlines the policy evaluation process, but also uncovers strategic avenues for change. Taken together, the domains of the SER Policy Review Protocol support a comprehensive approach to fostering equitable outcomes. Undertaking a review of policies for equity demands criticality that seeks to focus on educational equity; identify and reject bias-based beliefs; involve students, families, and community members in the policy writing and evaluation process guided by those beliefs; use evidence and data to support policy decisions; and engage in culturally responsive and sustaining educational and policy practices to promote educational equity.

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WestEd 

Systemic Equity Review

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that aims to improve the lives of children and adults at all ages of learning and development. We do this by addressing challenges in education and human development, reducing opportunity gaps, and helping build communities where all can thrive. WestEd staff conduct and apply research, provide technical assistance, and support professional learning. We work with early learning educators, classroom teachers, local and state leaders, and policymakers at all levels of government.