

# Equity Matters

by Regie Routman, featured speaker at the 2019 CCIRA Conference

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*Is providing all students equal access to an excellent education a constitutional right?* I believe it is; equity means we ensure *all* students receive what they need and desire to reach their full potential as individuals and productive citizens. Appallingly, for countless students, educational inequity reigns. Recent class-action lawsuits filed by students and their parents in Detroit, Michigan and Providence, Rhode Island argue that public schools have violated children's rights by failing to educate them well. That is, students have received such a poor quality education that they are graduating high school unprepared to be knowledgeable, fully contributing members of society.

The Preamble to the U.S Declaration of Independence (1776) declares:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they*

*are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these*

*are Life, **Liberty**, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

I would argue that the opportunity to pursue a happy, productive life and to actively participate as an informed citizen is an "unalienable right" and that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" *require* that we fully educate *all* our students. Tragically, this is not the case in many schools today, especially schools with large populations of students of color, students from low-income families, students where English is not their first language, and/or students who struggle. Too often, too little is expected and failure to receive a quality education creates a lifelong opportunity gap. We must do better!

I've been an educator, teaching and mentoring teachers and leaders in diverse schools in the U.S. and Canada for over 45 years. What I know in my heart and soul is we have not embraced equity for all; we do not yet as a society see it in our best interests to educate all our students. Segregated schools are once again a fact of life in today's urban cities; so are low expectations, excuses, and continual seeking of "quick fixes"—all of which fuel a system of low

achievement that perpetuates unhappiness and failure to thrive for large segments of our population.



Photo by Jeppe Hove Jensen

In my latest book, *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners* (Stenhouse, 2018), Equity is the section that is most important to me and that was also the hardest to write. While all my work has dealt with making school life and learning more equitable, I knew less about Equity than Engagement and Excellence. I therefore did extensive research, reading, and reflection to assess and make recommendations on why and how equity matters and how “with higher expectations and excellent, targeted teaching we can raise achievement and change lives.” (p. 258.)

## **9 Key Actions We Can and Must Take to Ensure Equity for All**

1. *Adopt a mindset that believes all students are uniquely capable and can learn at high levels.* I have never been in a classroom, school, or district where expectations are too high. Challenge old assumptions and beliefs. See beyond labels, test scores and poverty. Think: “Accelerate student learning,” not just “raise student achievement.” Get to know students and their families; let

parents know their child's strengths before discussing needs. Parental support can be vital for helping kids succeed. Accept responsibility for being each student's teacher. Share some of our own successes and missteps: let students know how and what we have learned from our own learning failures. Raise expectations for what's possible for all. Let students know—and follow through—that we care about them and their future and will do our best to support them every way we can.

2. *Share the power with students. Invite students to create "our classroom," not "my classroom."* For many students, especially those who have been repeatedly marginalized or denigrated, the classroom may be their only welcoming, safe haven—emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Listen more than we talk. Ensure that everyone's voice is heard and respected. Together, seek to develop a culture of trust, respect, kindness, and risk taking. Create an environment that is beautiful, nondiscriminatory, and literacy and content rich. Give students a fair say in what goes on the walls, what's in the classroom library, and how to make excellent and culturally responsive resources accessible to all. Do more small group work with students heterogeneously grouped. Allow more choices for how the classroom works, books students read, and topics students inquire and write about. Give students more options on how to display their learning. For example, instead of requiring everyone to do a written report, demonstrate and provide shared experiences and guidance in other forms and formats such as videos, podcasts, interviews, poems, songs and raps, and original multi-media presentations.

3. *Become professionally knowledgeable.* No shortcut here! Until we become highly knowledgeable as teachers of literacy—regardless of what subject we teach—we will always be seeking the "right" program, text, or expert to tell us exactly what to do. Equity for all requires that we teachers and leaders know relevant, research-based and principled literacy practices and how and when to apply those practices in all content areas. Strive to make Professional LITERACY Communities that meet regularly part of your school's culture. (See *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success*, ASCD, 2014, pp. 219-253 and Regie Routman Series at <https://www.heinemann.com/series/79.aspx> for specific guidelines and tools for high level, ongoing, professional learning.) Start by developing shared beliefs as a school. Only when teachers and the principal come together on shared beliefs that align with principled practices is it possible to effectively teach and assess responsively (what some call differentiated instruction) and for schoolwide achievement to take hold and be sustained.

4. *Make stories integral to the life of the classroom.* Value and respect all cultures and backgrounds. Provide daily opportunities for students to tell their stories, listen to stories, and share their stories in various formats. Stories are what humanize and connect us and help build a community of collaboration, acceptance, and respect. It's why I have interwoven about a dozen personal and professional stories into *Literacy Essentials*. Be sure to view the thought-provoking TED Talk by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche on the importance of hearing everyone's authentic cultural story, which is so crucial for us as educators working with students from diverse backgrounds. You can view and listen to Adiche's TED Talk, [The Danger of a Single Story](#). Think about ways you can celebrate, publish, and make students' written and oral stories public.

5. *Apply an Optimal Learning Model.* The Optimal Learning Model (OLM)—or what I often call “responsive-teaching-in action”—underpins all the teaching and assessing work I do. While a gradual handover of responsibility is part of the OLM, what's most important is knowing what types of—and why, how much, and when—demonstration, support, and practice are necessary before expecting the learner to productively apply what we are teaching. Through applying the OLM, we demystify the learning process so students come to understand what strategies and actions can lead to success.

Implicit in the OLM is adopting a whole-part-whole instructional approach, not a part-to-whole approach which breaks up learning into bits and pieces and makes learning harder for students. Many students never do figure out how all the parts fit together. Yet understanding how specific skills fit into a meaningful context is crucial for students' sustained engagement and independent application of what we are teaching them. Equity means we are teaching students how to learn, that is, our expert teaching includes actively developing students who self-question, self-monitor, and self-direct their learning.

6. *Reduce the need for intervention.* I continue to be stunned by the numbers of students who are referred to—and wind up receiving—special services. My Reading Recovery training decades ago taught me the value of good first teaching being the best intervention. For research-based and practical specifics on why and how to reduce the need for intervention, see chapter 4 in *Read, Write, Lead* (ASCD 2014, pp. 137-180.) <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/113016/chapters/Reducing-the-Need-for-Intervention.aspx>

7. *Intersect literacy, curriculum, and standards with real world issues.* The only way to prepare students of all ages to be informed, responsible, engaged

citizens at all stages of their lives and careers is to expertly integrate reading, writing, speaking and listening across the curriculum. When I first started working in underperforming schools, I focused on improving and accelerating reading and writing achievement. I learned that becoming readers and writers was insufficient. Especially in high challenge schools where pressure to raise test scores is relentless, social studies, science, and the arts are often sidelined or taught poorly. Yet, in order to be informed and fulfilled citizens and advocates for others and ourselves, we must know history, current events, how the world works, and much more.

To see how to meaningfully “fit it all in” in the limited time we have, see detailed lesson plan framework at <https://sites.stenhouse.com/literacyessentials/lesson-plan/> and adapt the information for your curriculum, standards, and students’ interests and needs. As well, we need to be teaching all students how to excel in oral and written communication such as public speaking, writing a coherent and concise statement, and collaborating well with others. All of these competencies are necessities for success in almost any job today and in the future, and many employers prize those skills over specific knowledge in a domain.

8. *Ensure all resources, literature, and texts are relevant to students, first-rate quality, and accessible to all.* Guarantee our classroom libraries, charts, word walls, content studies, etc. are established with students and that they equitably reflect and honor their diversity, abilities, and interests. Don’t settle for second-rate texts or resources! You can’t teach reading or writing well without reading, examining, and discussing outstanding literature.

9. *Make sure use of technology enriches learning, not just keeps kids busy.* Too often iPads, Chrome Books, and the like are seen as “the answer.” Beware of students moving through levels on a device for accurately assessing students’ progress or of having technology as the main instructional driver. Ensure our use of technology—or for that matter, any commercial program—supports and enhances our shared goals, shared beliefs, curriculum, and interests in a meaningful, equitable, and relevant manner. Ultimately, the best technology is still one caring teacher, meaningfully interacting with a student s/he values and recognizes for strengths, interests, and needs.

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