

# Achieving educational equity requires more than a lens, it requires an equity mindset



The concept of the equity lens in educational contexts has become part of the nomenclature in the last decade, as attention and focus has increased on doing better by students from minoritized communities. It seems certain that those in education communities calling for the use of an equity lens have been and continue to be well-intentioned, with an implied goal to drive deliberate and actionable change that ensures each child is provided the resources they need to perform at high levels academically and socially. That said, despite these well-intentioned efforts of education leaders and advocates over the last decade to put equity front and center, it also seems true the equity lens language may contribute to misunderstandings and mischaracterizations of what it means to advance equitable opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students.

The “lens” language conjures a metaphor that suggests that we put on our equity glasses when we talk about the needs of Black, Brown and minoritized students and communities. It evokes the notion of looking at students and communities through those equity spectacles. It also has the consequence, even if unintended, of bringing into focus for the viewer

what is wrong with these students and communities, reifying a deficit orientation to the work. Through an equity lens, even the well-intentioned can be misguided in their efforts—the lens serving as a tool to help them see clearly that which is wrong and needs to be fixed among those who are not achieving in otherwise expected ways. Equity lenses can contribute to tunnel vision among those who wear them—one that fixes the wearer’s gaze on students and communities as the problem, rather than centering learners’ assets, cultural funds of knowledge, and needs as the pivotal foundations for success.

Further, the nature of lenses, is that they can be removed. Achieving and sustaining equity in access, opportunity, support, and outcomes for all learners—and especially for minoritized children and their families who have been and continue to be treated as less than—we must resist the privilege to think about equity only when we remember to do so and when it is convenient. We must always be considering the degree to which deficit thinking and cultural relevance and responsiveness shape our perspectives and our behaviors, and we must be consistently color conscious in how we assess our systems and the impact that come from their design and implementation.

Lenses are not going to lead to enduring and sustained change that advances educational equity. What is needed is a transformation of mindset. Inequities experienced by students and communities are caused by inequities in systems. Real equity work requires a new gaze that looks all around, all the time, that interrogates the root causes of inequities and that is not fixated solely on the casualties of the inequitable systems that have been created and continue to be maintained. Central to developing equity mindsets is acknowledging the role racism plays in creating inequities and the role white privilege plays in sustaining them. We need to retrain our minds—addressing cognition and how we think—to create authentic equity mindsets.

Moving from an equity lens to an equity mindset changes our framing for the work that lies before and ahead of us. An equity mindset, and the necessary cognitive shifts that accompany it, are needed to normalize a new way of thinking, acting, and doing that will work in the service of achieving educational equity and eradicating racism at all levels—the personal, structural, and institutional.

---

This document was created by Saroja Warner (National Center for Systemic Improvement), cooperative agreement #H326R190001 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer: Perry Williams (August 2021).

WestEd is the lead organization for NCSI. For more information, please visit [www.ncsi.wested.org](http://www.ncsi.wested.org) and [www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org).