



Kentucky Department of  
**EDUCATION**

**Facilitating Conversations About  
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging**

## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
How Can Schools Ensure Equity?	4
What is the Kentucky Department of Education’s Role in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?	5
Promoting Student Equity Through Standards Implementation	6
What are the Current Discussions in the Kentucky Department of Education Around Equity?	8
Frequently Asked Questions	9
What is inclusion?	9
What is equity?	9
What is equality?	9
What is diversity?	9
What is disproportionality?	9
What are “underserved communities”?	10
What is critical race theory (CRT)?	10
Are schools in Kentucky teaching CRT?	10
Are CRT and social/emotional learning (SEL) the same thing?	10
References	12



## Introduction

This document serves to help districts facilitate conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) urges schools and school districts to discuss their understanding of these topics within their unique context in order to promote ways in which our schools and communities can be more equitable for all Kentucky students.

As conversations in the Commonwealth and the United States continue to interpret equity and its role in schools, KDE urges all boards of education, schools and citizens across Kentucky to keep in mind the goals for our students so each may be successful within the context of their own unique backgrounds, needs and potential.

### **An equitable student experience is therefore grounded in the following understandings:**

- Acknowledgement that events in the community are not separate from the context of school;
- A belief that creating safe and collaborative spaces for respectful dialogue where all voices are heard is important. In these safe spaces, students and staff members can discuss aspects of their identities, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, country of origin, differing abilities, personality and learning styles, as well as cultural, political, religious or other affiliations;
- A belief that by embracing a community of belonging and acceptance, educators model the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion; and
- A belief that students from historically underserved communities must receive equitable access and opportunities in order to experience positive outcomes.

The following statement made by Kentucky Commissioner of Education and Chief Learner Jason E. Glass, Ed.D., further explains equity and the many ways in which support is provided to ensure equitable access to opportunities for *all* students:

*“When we provide students with disabilities the support they need to participate in school and access the curriculum, this is equity. When we make sure that our children are not hungry at school by providing them with free or reduced-price meals, this is equity. When we make sure that our students who are learning English are provided the support they need to learn the language and to continue learning in their other subjects, this is equity. When we make sure that our poorest and most rural parts of the state have access to a high-quality and representative teacher workforce, this is equity. When we make sure that students who have different levels of support at home can participate in events, trips, sports and extracurricular activities regardless of their backgrounds, this is equity.*”



Kentucky Department of  
**E D U C A T I O N**

*Kentucky’s public schools have a moral commitment to serve every child and family. We also recognize that our students come to us with a variety of different backgrounds and experiences. Discussing difficult issues is how we prepare our students to be citizens in our democratic republic and our state has a long tradition of empowering our local educators to make the best decisions for their students.”*

## **How Can Schools Ensure Equity?**

Kentucky’s [Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(KyMTSS\)](#) is a framework that organizes the systems, data and practices along a layered continuum of supports to build positive, equitable and inclusive learning experiences for each and every student. Systems such as strong and engaged district and school leadership teams provide the foundation for implementing, improving and sustaining an equity-based multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). Leadership teams that are representative of key stakeholders – including administrators, teachers, students, family and community partners – who advocate for and ensure that all students have access to the full range of opportunities and resources is critical to student success.

Inequitable outcomes for historically underrepresented populations are addressed by teams through a strategic analysis of disaggregated data and data-based decision-making. Schools can ensure equity by examining current policies, programs and practices for underlying assumptions and beliefs based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, country of origin, differing abilities, personality and learning styles, as well as cultural, political, religious or other affiliations. MTSS leadership teams start with this systems-level approach and examine the distribution of resources including funding, access to high-quality teachers, rigorous coursework, support services, supportive school climates and extracurricular opportunities to ensure:

- All students are **taught by educators who are fully prepared and supported** throughout their careers.
- **All students are provided with access to a range of supportive services** that ensure their health and well-being.
- **All schools receive funding that is equitable, stable and adequate** to provide all students with essential workplace ethics and grade-level learning experiences that spark curiosity and encourage creative problem-solving.
- All students are provided **access to high-quality curriculum aligned to the *Kentucky Academic Standards*, school-wide behavioral expectations and core social-emotional competencies, evidenced-based instructional practices and up-to-date instructional resources and tools**, including computers and related technology (adapted from The Learning Policy Institute, 2021).



Within the organizational framework of MTSS, the universal level of support (Tier 1) available to all students includes high-quality instruction and support through a coherent local curriculum aligned to the rigor of the grade-level *Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS)*, schoolwide behavioral expectations and core social-emotional competencies. Equitable practices at Tier 1 include:

- Schools intentionally design their universal instruction in a way that allows *all* students to engage with it.
- Evidence-based curriculum and instructional practices used for academic, behavior and social-emotional learning are designed to be responsive to the diverse backgrounds, abilities and life experiences represented by the students and the community.
- Practices, curriculum, instructional resources and the school environment authentically reflect the images and experiences of all students.
- Instruction is differentiated and scaffolded as needed to ensure that each and every student has access to the content and skills taught.
- Schools intentionally create a positive school climate that encourages inclusion and promotes respect for the identities and cultures of the learners and families served.
- School and classroom spaces are inviting, physically and environmentally safe, and support learning and engagement of all students.

### **What is the Kentucky Department of Education’s Role in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?**

KDE is committed to its core values of equity, achievement, collaboration and integrity. KDE offers guidance, resources, tools and professional learning opportunities to help educators achieve equitable outcomes for students. As mentioned above, equity is inextricably tied to the [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#), which works to create equitable opportunities and access for students.

As part of this commitment, KDE continues to support schools in creating more equitable environments (as defined above) for their students. KDE has many resources to provide this support as schools continue to create a sense of belonging where all students are able to thrive. Such resources include:

- An “equity toolkit” for schools and districts to use. The toolkit provides the following resources:
  - An "equity dashboard" which contains live, inward-facing data on the under-representation or over-representation of various indicators at the district and school level. Indicators include: special education, chronic absence, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, gifted and talented, advanced



- coursework/dual credit, career and technical education (CTE) coursework and CTE completers.
- An “equity playbook” with hybrid (live and asynchronous) professional learning opportunities for school and district leaders to receive coaching and “plays” as they pertain to equitable decision-making. The five “plays” include: student achievement; disciplinary practices and procedures; high-quality programming and teachers; distribution of funding and resources; and school culture and climate.
- A4 Modules: Framework designed to provide individuals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to increase effectiveness in working with people from diverse backgrounds.
- [Kentucky Academy for Equity in Teaching \(KAET\)](#): KAET is dedicated to not only to the recruitment of minority teachers, but also the retention of minority educators to the profession.
- [KDE Collaborative Civic Spaces Module](#): This module explains the value of creating collaborative civic spaces in classrooms to enable effective communication and discourse among students. Teachers are provided with the tools and resources to support students in engaging in meaningful discussions/democratic discourse and respecting diverse opinions in the classroom.

### **Promoting Student Equity Through Standards Implementation**

The General Assembly, per KRS 158.6451(1)(a-b), establishes that schools shall both expect a high level of achievement of all students and develop students’ ability to:

- Become self-sufficient individuals of good character exhibiting the qualities of altruism, citizenship, courtesy, hard work, honesty, human worth, justice, knowledge, patriotism, respect, responsibility and self-discipline;
- Become responsible members of a family, work group or community, including demonstrating effectiveness in community service; and
- Think and solve problems in school situations and in a variety of situations they will encounter in life.

There is a great need for schools and districts to develop coherent curriculum that intentionally connects standards, instruction and assessment across classrooms. A lack of a clearly articulated curriculum not only hinders improvement, but also can lead to redundancy and inconsistency in what is taught from one classroom to the next across all grade levels.

Therefore, translating the standards into a high-quality local curriculum is critical to student success. The curriculum must ensure that specific content is taught in specific courses and at specific grade levels, regardless of the teacher assigned to the student. When schools and



districts are unable to provide a high-quality curriculum, it creates disparity in opportunities to learn for students (*KDE Model Curriculum Framework*, Page 6).

The purpose of the *Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS)* is to ensure all students across Kentucky focus on a common set of standards and are provided with opportunities to learn at high levels.

The KAS address a foundational framework of what is to be learned and contains the minimum requirements of what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or grade band. Schools are required to implement the KAS established in 704 KAR 3:303 and 704 KAR Chapter 8. The local district also assures that all students have had access and opportunity to learn the standards contained in the *Kentucky Academic Standards*.

Thus, local implementation of the KAS ensures consistent and equitable access to high-quality, grade-level-appropriate learning for *all* students. While the standards address what is to be learned, they do not address how learning experiences are to be designed or what instructional resources are to be used. Resources to support standards implementation that promote teacher and student equity include:

- The [Model Curriculum Framework \(MCF\)](#): Provides guidance for schools and districts in implementing educational best practices around the local curriculum development process, professional learning communities and a comprehensive, balanced system of assessment in a way that positively impacts student achievement.
- [High-Quality Instructional Resources \(HQIRs\)](#): Access to comprehensive HQIRs enables teachers to adapt lessons to meet the diverse needs of students and to focus their time, energy and creativity on bringing lessons to life and engaging students with the content. KDE defines HQIRs as materials that are:
  - Aligned with the *Kentucky Academic Standards*;
  - Research-based and/or externally validated;
  - Comprehensive to include engaging texts (books, multimedia, etc.), problems and assessments;
  - Culturally relevant, free from bias; and
  - Accessible for all students.
- [High-Quality Professional Learning \(HQPL\)](#): Research demonstrates a positive link between high-quality professional learning (HQPL), teaching practices and student outcomes. Effective professional learning not only has the potential to improve both classroom instruction and student outcomes, but it also can be effective in recruiting and retaining teachers. When designing and/or selecting HQPL at the local level, it is important to ensure alignment with the following characteristics:
  - Is aligned with state academic standards, school and/or district goals and other professional learning activities;



- Is content-focused;
- Incorporates active learning;
- Uses models and modeling of effective practice;
- Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
- Provides coaching and expert support;
- Offers feedback and reflection; and
- Is sustained and continuous.

### **What are the Current Discussions in the Kentucky Department of Education Around Equity?**

As stated by Commissioner and Chief Learner Jason E. Glass, Ed.D. (2021),

*“Equity in education is fundamentally an effort to ensure that all of our students have the supports they need to meet our academic standards and to reach their full potential as students, citizens and human beings. An equity focus in education recognizes that public school students come to us with a variety of backgrounds, needs, supports and experiences, and that we must take those into account when we consider the education of each child.”*

- KDE supports district and school efforts to find ways to be more inclusive of special education students in their least restrictive environments, and when possible, in accelerated learning programs (including gifted/talented, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International and dual credit courses).
- KDE urges school leaders to determine methods for reducing office referrals, suspensions and expulsions for traditionally underserved students. Based on the [2020 Kentucky School Report Card](#), non-white students made up around 25% of the population in Kentucky schools. Non-white students were almost two-thirds more likely to have a documented behavior incident than their white peers.
- Postsecondary readiness continues to be a major focus in Kentucky as educators consider how to increase access to Advanced Placement, dual credit, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International and career and technical education classes for underserved populations.





## Frequently Asked Questions

### *What is inclusion?*

KDE defines inclusion as “the intentional act of creating an environment that fosters mutually respectful relationships in which each student, regardless of intellectual, social, cultural and geographic background, is welcomed, supported and valued as a fully participating member of society.”

### *What is equity?*

KDE defines equity as the promotion of access, opportunity and advancement of all individuals, including those in underserved communities, in order to identify and eliminate conditions that prevent the ability of all students to reach their full potential.

### *What is equality?*

“Equality is the condition under which every individual is treated in the same way, and is granted the same rights and responsibilities, regardless of their individual differences.”  
(University of Washington School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, 2017)

### *What is diversity?*

KDE defines diversity as “individual traits and differences which directly impact the engagement, inclusivity and experiences of students, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, country of origin, differing abilities, personality and learning styles, as well as cultural, political, religious or other affiliations.”

### *What is disproportionality?*

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2021) defines disproportionality as “a group’s representation in a particular category that exceeds expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category. Special education disproportionality has been referred to as the extent to which membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category. Disciplinary disproportionality encompasses the disproportionately high rates at which students from certain racial/ethnic groups are subjected to office discipline referrals, suspensions, school arrests and expulsion.”



*What are “underserved communities”?*

KDE defines underserved groups as “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social and civic life” ([Federal Executive Order 13985, 2020](#)).

*What is critical race theory (CRT)?*

According to Price Groves (2021), “Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that provides education researchers, policy makers and practitioners with critical lenses to deconstruct oppressive policies and practices and to construct more emancipatory systems for racial equity and justice.”

According to Sawchuck (2021), “The basic tenets of critical race theory, or CRT, emerged out of a framework for legal analysis in the late 1970s and early 1980s created by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Richard Delgado, among others.” CRT is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. Sawchuck found that the core idea of CRT is that race is a social construct. Biologists now understand that despite our outward differences in appearance, there are no biological or genetic differences between people who look different.

Thus, race, as a concept, is not a biological phenomenon, but a social construct developed as a way of creating differences, hierarchy, class and power of one group over another.

*Are schools in Kentucky teaching CRT?*

CRT is a research methodology normally taught in graduate schools or law schools. The KAS do not contain any reference or integration of CRT. KDE is not aware of any districts expressly teaching CRT as defined above as a graduate level or legal theory.

*Are CRT and social/emotional learning (SEL) the same thing?*

No. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2021), SEL is as follows:

“The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

The integration of SEL helps students learn about themselves and others, with the goal of making responsible and caring decisions. SEL is critical to teaching and learning. It allows students to become well-rounded individuals equipped to reach their full potential.



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CASEL has identified five SEL competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (2021). These competencies are fundamental to every student, classroom, school and community. Most importantly, SEL is not a political effort favoring one perspective or another. SEL is an opportunity to fulfill the development of each unique learner.



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**EDUCATION**

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