

## VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

## The Science (and Art) of Equity: Practical Steps YOU Can Take to Move Toward a More Just Classroom



Equity is at the heart of education; great educators make sure that every student has what they need to thrive.

To champion equity for our students, we need to understand them deeply: how they see themselves, how they see the world, and how the world sees them. Then, we need to structure our classrooms so that every learner has the support they need to succeed.

Here's how:

### Acknowledge the Problem

Did you know that by the end of fourth grade, students who live in poverty are two years behind their wealthier peers in reading and math, and that by twelfth grade, they've slipped four years behind?

Did you know that by the end of high school, Black and Hispanic students' reading and mathematics skills have fallen to roughly the same as those of white students in the eighth grade? Or that only 20% of college students enrolling in engineering are women?

We clearly have a long way to go to achieve educational equity. But by making justice a priority, we can make real strides in our classrooms, our schools, and the world.

What does that look like? It involves educating ourselves. It involves being intentional with our empathy, using specific strategies so we can listen with real understanding to the lived experiences of our students.

And it involves helping teachers empower students to have a real impact outside of the walls of our school. When teachers help students apply their learning to promote justice and equity, we cultivate a generation of citizens with the attitudes and aptitudes to make the world a better place.

## Educate Yourself!

We can't promote equity effectively if we don't understand it deeply. As you consider how to cultivate equity in your classroom, there are a variety of ways to expand your understanding. When we reflect, read, study, and listen to those around us, we become wiser and more capable champions for equity.

1. **Reflect!** One of the biggest steps we can take to address equity in our schools is to challenge our own beliefs. What assumptions, experiences, and biases are we holding on to that may implicitly shape the work we do? How does the [language we use](#) impact the way our students see themselves and our school? What can we do to learn from others, specifically our students, to give us a better, more informed understanding of our world?
2. **Read!** Check out the [Recommended Reading List](#) to help deepen your understanding of some of the most important equity-related issues facing our world today.
3. **Study!** Challenge your own assumptions by looking at what researchers are discovering about the realities surrounding issues like race, class, and gender in our world today.
4. **Listen!** In order for change to happen, we must have conversations that address the issues directly. We can't expect students to know how to have these conversations unless we model open dialogue in our schools. So, be open and honest, address inequalities head on, and model what productive conversations look like.

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## Practical Strategies to Promote Diversity, Empathy, and Equity

Empathy is at the heart of equity. When students listen with empathy and kindness, they form a solid foundation for the wise pursuit of justice. Help your students develop their empathy by implementing these simple, powerful strategies.

1. **Open Their Gifts:** Student diversity means unique talents. Help students know that their uniqueness is valued and valuable by identifying areas of strength, and then using those strengths to create roles students can play to improve your classroom community. Share the [Gifts Organizer](#) with your teachers to help them get started.
2. **Get Literary:** When we [read great literature](#), it helps us assume the perspective of another. Incorporating literature from diverse cultures can help students cultivate a sense of empathy for people with perspectives and life experiences that are different from their own. Want some great classroom reads to help promote diversity, empathy, and equity? Check out the [Recommended Reading List](#) from the Blue Apple project, [Take a Stand!](#)
3. **Praise Kindness = Praise Achievement:** Our society frequently gives attention and praise for high achievement. It's less common that we praise kindness and empathy — although character is at least as important. Encourage teachers to keep a tally chart of the times they offer praise. On one side, record times you praise achievement. On the other, the times you praise kindness. Collect tallies anonymously, and share the aggregate data at staff meetings to help your staff reflect on the kinds of praise they're offering.
4. **H.E.A.R. Each Other:** Teach your staff to model empathy directly with the H.E.A.R. Protocol:
  - **HALT** — pause your own words to really listen to the other.
  - **ENGAGE** — give the other person your full attention.
  - **ANTICIPATE** — remind yourself that by really hearing the other person, you will likely learn something new.
  - **REPLAY** — summarize what you're hearing to make sure you understand correctly, and to demonstrate that you were listening authentically.



5. **Kindness Heroes:** We learn by seeing others in action. In common areas of your school, [share stories of great acts of historical or contemporary kindness](#); you'll provide students with models for how to practice kindness and empathy in their own lives.
6. **Kindness Bingo:** Kindness doesn't have to be historic — we can make the world a more empathetic and equitable place by practicing everyday kindnesses. Help students make a positive difference by taking small, bold steps from the [Kindness Bingo](#) boards.

## Empower Your Students — and Power Up Their Learning!

The most powerful way to promote equity in your school is to involve your students in advocating for justice!

Identify an issue your student body is passionate about, then work with students and teachers to develop a plan that allows them to use their skills and their voices to make a positive difference. Classes might create a PSA, host a fundraiser, or get out into your community to help people in need.

No matter what you do, your school will be teaching a powerful lesson: that students have the power to have a real impact. And when you do, the research shows that you'll make their learning that much richer and deeper.

- According to the Buck Institute for Education, PBL can be a powerful tool to eliminate achievement gaps and help students of all backgrounds develop critical [21st-century learning skills](#).
- PBL is an effective strategy for all students, outperforming traditional curricula not only for high achieving students, but across grade levels and racial and socioeconomic groups.
- In a University of Michigan [study of over 2,000 third-grade students](#), PBL raised average science test scores. The data revealed that students at all reading levels outperformed those in traditional classrooms.
- In an [AP study of over 3,000 students](#) in five school districts, students in PBL AP classes outperformed those in traditional AP classes, improving test pass rates by 8 percent.



# Project-Based Learning & Equity

If you would like to try a project-based learning experience which help students make a difference, check out [Take a Stand](#), where students learn to stand up, respectfully but with conviction, for an issue they care deeply about. The project integrates standards from ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and culminates when students publish a podcast and share their voices with the world.



- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

## Conclusion

If we want our world to become a more equitable place, it starts in our schools. When we educate ourselves, when we listen to our students with empathy, and when we help them to strive for justice both in our classrooms and outside our walls, we can take small, bold steps in the right direction. Is your school ready to take a stand for change?

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:  
The Science (and Art) of Equity: Practical Steps YOU Can Take to Move Toward a  
More Just Classroom**

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