

Whole-school equity

A guide for governing boards in schools and trusts

September 2023

Too many young people are held back by the prejudices and biases of others, and schools must be a place where these are challenged. Unfortunately, no school is fully immune from the harm caused by sexism, racism, ableism, classism and anti-LGBT+ prejudice.

Having a plan for whole-school equity helps schools to ensure that what's taught and communicated is inclusive, that young people have a voice in how the school is run, and that no one is discouraged from exploring the future that best fits their talents.

Governing boards have an important role in supporting and influencing an environment where:

- young people feel safe, respected and valued
- difference is welcomed
- everyone is encouraged to recognise and challenge their biases
- pupils are supported to achieve their full potential

About this guide

This guide is intended to help governing boards in all types of schools and trusts to understand what a whole-school approach to equity means and how to make tangible progress. The guide focuses on pupil outcomes; however, we recognise that workplace culture and governing board diversity are also essential components of a truly inclusive environment.

Please note: some of the resources featured in this guide are available exclusively to [NGA members](#).

The language we use

Equality and equity are often used interchangeably, but they are very different ideas. Please see definitions below, which are taken from [this article](#).

- **Equality** means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities.
- **Equity** recognises that each person has different circumstances, and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.

Limit Less campaign

This guide has been produced in collaboration with the [Limit Less campaign](#), which exists to remove barriers that too many young people face to choosing to progress in physics.

The campaign is calling for whole-school approaches to equity and inclusion in all schools.

[Watch the explainer animation](#) to set the context and frame conversations.

What does whole-school equity look like?

A plan for whole-school equity will look different in every school but should include everything the school is doing to eliminate discrimination. When building their plans, schools should consider:

Professional practice and development	All staff (teaching and non-teaching) within the school should be included, trained to play an active role and made aware of the effect of biases, conscious and unconscious.
Pupil voice: putting young people at the heart of change	A crucial step is supporting pupils to understand and challenge injustice and stereotypes, allowing them ownership of the issues.
Curriculum and learning	Resources and the curriculum should be audited to ensure equal opportunities. Pupils should be able to choose subjects and activities based on their preferences and skills, rather than their gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or background.
Progression, choices and jobs	Everyone has a role to play in opening pupils' eyes to the diversity and range of options available for their future, which should not be limited by their own or others' expectations.
Internal and external communications	Schools communicate with a diverse audience including parents, carers, pupils, staff and the wider community. Processes should be put in place to make sure communication and materials counter stereotypes and do not reinforce bias.
Engagement with parents, carers and the wider community	The biggest impact will be made when the whole school community works together. Parents and carers need to be involved in developing the vision and consulting on areas where perspectives may differ.

The governing board's role

The governing board is responsible for working with school/trust leaders to [establish a vision](#) and ethos which ensures that young people feel included and safe, achieve well, and are free to make informed choices about their future.

A commitment to equity and inclusion should be a visible element of school/trust culture, along with a drive to tackle injustice. This should be reflected in policies which shape school practices.

Whole-school equity planning should be present throughout all aspects of school life and act as a lens through which the board shapes policy and practice. Relevant policy areas may include, but are not limited to:

- Admissions and [attendance](#)
- [Behaviour](#) and exclusion
- [Careers](#)
- [Safeguarding](#)
- [SEND](#)
- [School uniform](#)

While the [Equality Act 2010](#) and Public Sector Equality Duty provide a legal framework that schools must comply with, boards will need to go beyond meeting these legal duties to create an environment that is truly inclusive and supports pupils to reach their full potential.

Governing boards should consider – both as individuals and as a group – taking time to reflect on how their own life experiences may influence and shape decisions. NGA’s freely available [Learning Link module](#) on unconscious bias is helpful here.

Building insight and understanding

The following questions can serve as a prompt, wherever your school or trust is on its inclusion journey. They could form part of an initial meeting at board level, be a constant prompt, or used to shine a light on areas for further exploration and activity.

Data and evidence

- Do we look for patterns across a range of sources, for example, progression by subject, attainment, attendance, behaviour, rewards, extra-curricular participation and sport?
- Where disparities are identified, do we know why?
- Is the board satisfied that appropriate plans are in place to address this?
- Is there evidence that teachers and leaders have high expectations of all pupils?

Keep in mind that some pupil groups are nationally tracked (for example by sex, pupil premium eligibility, special educational needs, and ethnicity) whereas schools may need to take a more tailored approach for some characteristics, such as cultural and familial background, and expectations that may influence pupils’ choices and outcomes.

Pupil voice

- What mechanisms are in place for the board to hear from pupils (such as a school council)?
- How are the experiences and voices of young people centered and involved in decision making in the school?
- Does this help the board to gain an understanding of the experiences of all pupils?
- Can the board point to examples of where pupil voice has influenced decision making?

Curriculum

- Does the school/trust provide a broad and balanced curriculum that equips pupils for the next stage of education and adult life as a global citizen?
- Do curriculum materials represent a range of groups and communities, including those that have historically been unrepresented or hidden?
- Are all subjects and post-16 pathways presented to pupils as equally valid and accessible?

Professional practice and staff development

- What formal and informal opportunities are there for staff to develop their knowledge and confidence in whole school equity and inclusion issues?
- Are all school staff (teaching and non-teaching) trained and encouraged to recognise the impact of their own biases and those of pupils and colleagues?
- Has staff development resulted in a culture of safety and openness? How can you tell?
- Do HR and recruitment processes need to be further developed to support recruitment of underrepresented candidates or make opportunities more accessible?
- Do staff feel valued?

Ongoing work

While there are ‘quick wins’ within a whole-school approach to equity and inclusion, embedding change will require sustained commitment from all stakeholders. We recommend that boards and school/trust leaders agree a limited number of first steps and decide how to monitor the work.

Your plan should include milestones, roles and responsibilities, and expected impact. Local and school communities change over time – boards and leaders should be agile in their response to changing circumstances.

While this work may consist of a series of smaller projects, each should clearly contribute to the wider school/trust vision. Planning should inform and feed into annual school improvement cycles and align with wider success metrics for the school/trust.

“Governors have a vital role to play in making sure that every child gets the best possible education. We must ask searching questions to ensure that no group of students are undervalued or left behind.”

Dr Yeasmin Mortuza

Hartley Primary School, part of the Learning in Harmony Trust

Further reading and resources

- Diverse Educators network – [DEI Toolkit](#), [training session](#) and [webcasts](#).
- Governors for Schools – [2023 conference](#) and Year of Inclusion
- The Welsh Government – [framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing](#) has many helpful principles and prompts