

Education Today

Acceptance and Belonging: A Pathway for Student Success

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There has been significant discussion and concern regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies and practices nationwide, encompassing the United States Department of Education, higher education, K-12 schools, and other institutions and agencies that receive federal funding.

DEI initiatives originated from civil rights principles to ensure equal protection for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or beliefs. Duquesne City School District tailored its Board policies to the socio-economic demographics of the Mon Valley, addressing the educational needs of its students and staff.

To that end, the School District, starting in 2022, implemented Board policies for Educational Equity and Racial Equity / Inclusion to promote “acceptance and belonging” for all students and staff. The 2025 Financial Recovery Plan includes a specific initiative with action steps to ensure that the educational setting is based on “common ground” for a welcoming and culturally respectful learning environment. <https://www.dukecitysd.org>

The Board policies are essential elements in fulfilling the School District's mission for its K-8 school, which serves 475 students. Of these students, 91.1% are economically disadvantaged, 77% are identified as minorities, and 24% are English Language Learners. These policies ensure the well-being and success of all students and staff, promoting a safe and welcoming environment based on educational equity.

Educational equity is based on the principles of fairness and justice in allocating resources and treatment and creating opportunities for each student’s success according to his or her unique needs.

Educational equity promotes the real possibility of equality of education – results for all students and among students of color and / or low socio-economic status, English language learners, and students with cognitive / physical disabilities.

These Board policies exemplify unwavering commitment to the well-being and success of every student and staff member in an educational environment where diversity is celebrated and inclusion becomes second nature. Therefore, it is critical that educational equity policies are implemented, monitored, and evaluated annually based on principles of leadership and assurances.

There are seven Guiding Principles of Educational Equity that include Equitable Policies and Practices; Comparably High Academic Achievement and Student Outcomes; Equitable Access and

Inclusion; Equitable Treatment; Equitable Treatment to Learn; Equitable Resources; and Accountability.

Although there are several key components that are universal to all school districts when considering Board policies for educational equity, here are three key takeaways:

1. *Encourage positive interactions and trust, fostering an environment of acceptance, respect, safety, and security. Inspire students to pursue learning and excellence without fear of threat, humiliation, danger, or disregard.*
2. *Implement a culture of high expectations of students and staff, diverse teaching methods, and tailored support for teachers and students.*
3. *Provide high-quality, relevant curricula, instructional materials, teaching strategies, and assessments that reflect the diversity of students and staff. These should aim for an understanding of various cultural perspectives, class, language, ethnicity, poverty, ability, and other differences that make each student and staff member unique.*

School Board policies regarding "acceptance and belonging" are important for all school districts, as they aim to protect students and ensure equal treatment and opportunities. By implementing these values, school boards and educators can address the needs of students and staff and promote a more equitable environment for the community.

The road ahead for a severely distressed school district like Duquesne is not without challenges. However, by accepting the principles of educational equity and racial equity / inclusion, Duquesne is building a foundation for long-term success. These policies are not just about education, they are about creating a society where fairness, opportunity, and respect thrive.

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