UMass Boston

ADVANCING EQUITY

Practice Brief:

Using Data to Advance Equity

Background

Traditional educational data practices often prioritize quantitative, outcome-driven metrics intended to provide objective insight into student performance. While these tools can be helpful for setting clear academic goals and tracking progress, they also carry significant limitations. Solely focusing on numerical data—such as test scores, behavior tallies, and attendance—can reduce complex student experiences to isolated figures, overlooking important context and missing opportunities to address root causes.

Research shows that even when students engage in identical behavior, factors such as race and gender can influence how their actions are perceived and recorded. Thus, data collection must be approached critically, with awareness of who defines the questions, what types of data are prioritized, and whose voices are included or excluded. Additionally, traditional data practices often focus heavily on outcomes—such as IEP goals or standardized test performance—without considering the learning process or emotional journey that students experience along the way. Knowing that a student met a goal does not tell us whether they feel confident, supported, or engaged. This narrow focus can limit educators' understanding of students' holistic development.

In contrast, equity-centered data practices advocate for more inclusive, reflective, and process-oriented approaches. These practices encourage educators to involve students and families in identifying issues, collecting and interpreting data, and designing interventions. They promote gathering both qualitative and quantitative data, centering marginalized voices, and examining systemic patterns that may reinforce inequity. Used thoughtfully, data can be a powerful tool for advancing educational equity. It allows schools to ask: How are teacher practices contributing to inequitable outcomes? Shifting the purpose of data from compliance to collaboration helps ensure all students are seen, heard, and supported—not just measured.
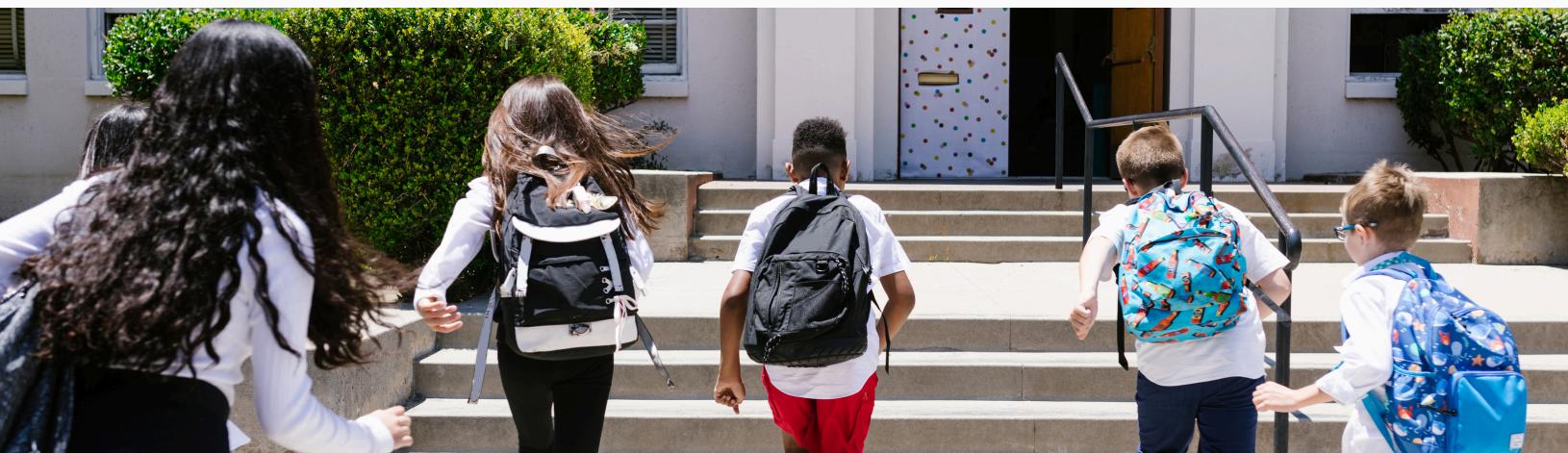
Key Strategies

To use data as a tool for equity, educators must move beyond traditional practices and adopt more inclusive, reflective approaches. The following key strategies support the development of equity-centered data use:

Critically Examine Bias in Data Practices:
Educators should regularly ask who is shaping the questions being asked, what types of data are prioritized, and whose perspectives are missing. Bias can emerge in data collection methods, interpretation, and even in the kinds of problems identified. Teams should ensure data sources are representative and question assumptions that may influence their analysis.

Balance Quantitative and Qualitative Data:
While numerical data offers measurable outcomes, it often misses context. Combining it with qualitative methods—like student interviews, family surveys, or teacher reflections—helps provide a fuller picture. For instance, student voice can help explain patterns in behavior or performance that numbers alone cannot capture.

Center Student and Family Voice:
Students and families should be involved throughout the data process: from identifying areas of concern to shaping interventions. Strategies include sharing de-identified data for feedback, involving students in goal-setting, and inviting families to contribute to planning and decision-making. This shifts data use from a top-down process to one that is collaborative and empowering.

Focus on Process, Not Just Outcomes:
Data collection should also reflect students' experiences, engagement, and well-being. Educators can observe classroom interactions, gather informal feedback, and track how students respond to supports over time. This helps reveal whether interventions are not only effective but also meaningful and supportive.

Use Data to Identify and Disrupt Inequities:
Data should be disaggregated by race, gender, disability status, and other factors to highlight inequitable patterns. From there, schools can design targeted responses that address root causes rather than symptoms, with a focus on transforming systems, not just student behavior.

Takeaways

As you reflect on how to integrate equity-focused redirection and response into your classroom, consider the following key takeaways to guide your thinking and planning:

- Reflect on Personal Alignment: Identify which strategies from the lessons resonated with or surprised you. It's also important to recognize how equity-focused approaches align with—or differ from—your current practices.

- Build on What You Already Do: Acknowledge existing practices that support equity and positive redirection. Leverage these familiar strategies as a foundation for continued growth.

- Plan for Practical Application: Choose specific strategies to implement in your classroom, prioritizing those that feel both realistic and impactful.

- Anticipate and Prepare for Challenges: Consider potential barriers to implementation (e.g., time constraints, student resistance, systemic factors). Anticipating these challenges can help you strategize solutions and ensure a smoother transition.

- Lean on Your Community: Identify supportive colleagues and staff who can collaborate with you or offer guidance. Look to those already using these approaches successfully as models or mentors.

Conclusion

Throughout this practice brief, we discussed the importance of using reflective, inclusive, and equity-focused data to ensure student outcomes through:

- Incorporating Key Strategies into their practice
  - Critically examining bias in data practices
  - Balance the types of data used
  - Collaborate with students and families
  - Ensure the process is meaningful and supportive for students and families
  - Use data systematically to identify and disrupt inequities

- Reflecting on current practices to guide future thinking and planning.