

# Omaha World-Herald

## Why is 'equity' radioactive? Nebraska educators pushing for it, but critics pushing back

Joe Dejka

November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Patsy Koch Johns didn't know equity could be construed as a bad word until this year.

During Nebraska's raging debate over **proposed health education** standards, critics charged that the Nebraska State Board of Education was trying to infuse the standards with equity.

"When I say 'equity,' I've even had people correct me and say 'equality,'" said Koch Johns, the board's vice president.

For decades, equity has been a goal in education. Schools have tried to close test score gaps by addressing the challenges poverty presents for kids.

But race burst forth as a focus after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a White police officer. Moved by his death, many educators across the country and in Nebraska reaffirmed their commitment to racial equity.

The emphasis on race in education inflamed some critics, who see it as divisive.

Critics see equity as a kind of Trojan horse, the belly of which is full of bad, even un-American, ideas being loosed on kids in the name of helping them.

Advocates acknowledge that the concept has become a lightning rod for controversy — the latest example coming last week as Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts criticized an equity plan launched by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Ricketts said the plan would promote critical race theory on campus, though NU's president has said that's not the case.

The state's K-12 educators for several years have been stepping up the focus on equity:

Members of the Nebraska State Board of Education adopted an “equity lens,” a sort of checklist they use to review proposed policies and programs to ensure they don’t hurt particular demographic groups.

Nebraska Commissioner of Education Matt Blomstedt hired an equity officer in his department.

Grand Island Public Schools, on its website, outlines a commitment to equity and to “disrupting” individual and districtwide biases.

Lincoln Public Schools created a student-led Equity Cadre that advises district leaders on how to overcome biases and barriers.

At a conference this month in Omaha, Nebraska educators learned about how to bring equity to their schools. The conference was sponsored by the Nebraska Association of School Boards and the Nebraska Association of School Administrators.

Advocates say equity is about giving kids what they need, when they need it, to ensure their success, regardless of a child’s personal circumstances, background or challenges. That can mean supporting some kids with extra resources.

Critics claim, however, that it can lead to dumbing down grading policies, weakening discipline in hopes of reducing suspensions and expulsions, eliminating homework and F grades, getting rid of prerequisites for honors courses and doing away with gifted programs.

Koch Johns, who experienced poverty as a child, urged the board in 2019 to adopt the equity lens.

She said it reflects the same sentiment as the Native American adage that you can’t fully understand someone till you walk a mile in their shoes.

The lens is a flow chart that the board uses to consider the positive and negative impacts on specific groups. The lens calls for the board to consider race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expressions, family structure and tribal membership, among other things.

Kids have different life experiences, she said.

“As state board members, it’s our job to think beyond just what we grew up with or what we know,” she said.

She said there’s no hidden agenda behind equity. Equity has been plagued by misinterpretation and misinformation, she said.

“I don’t see what it has to do with critical race theory at all,” she said.

Adherents of critical race theory often say it's a graduate level academic tool for examining systemic racism in government and society. Critics have countered that it's a worldview akin to Marxism that divides people by race into oppressed and oppressors.

Neal McClusky, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said equity and critical race theory are "used together a lot, and equity often is used to mean things that would also fall under critical race theory."

He said the country's been talking about equity and academic achievement gaps for decades.

Over the last 20 years, there had been a shift in emphasis away from using race and focusing supports and interventions on poverty, he said. Americans had been embracing colorblindness, he said.

After Floyd's murder, superintendents and principals began writing letters to their communities saying the incident opened their eyes, he said.

But as school districts began hiring trainers and consultants to review inequities and subconscious biases, critics pushed back saying they didn't want the focus to be on race, he said.

Equity has become a tug-of-war between those who believe the government should be colorblind and those who feel the government should account for race in its decisions, he said.

People were more willing to accept equity when it was framed as helping kids in poverty overcome obstacles, he said.

When equity is based on race, it's perceived as pitting one race against another, he said.

Khalilah Harris, managing director for K-12 education policy at the Center for American Progress, said people don't necessarily understand what's meant by equity and critical race theory.

She said critics use critical race theory as a "dog whistle of somebody's coming to take your stuff, somebody's coming to harm your children."

"You have a very small number of racists who get a lot of air time," she said.

She said that's undermining trust in the education system.

She said equity is about bridging the gaps in opportunity so young people can have access to a quality education.

Equity in Nebraska could mean, for example, making investments in broadband delivery to serve rural White students, she said.

Or it may be equitable to eliminate a prerequisite for an AP or International Baccalaureate course if the student came from a school with low resources where the prerequisite wasn't offered, she said.

Jonathan Butcher, a Will Skillman Fellow in Education at the Heritage Foundation, said equity, just like diversity and inclusion, is not a bad word on its own.

The problem, he said, is it's been redefined.

The concept of "equality under the law" has been twisted into "equity according to policy," he said.

"Equity according to policy means government creates the same outcomes for everyone," he said.

That gives rise to concerns about lowering expectations, he said.

"It's not talking about treating people equally. It's about forcing equal outcomes regardless of individual choices. That's what defines equity. You're not just saying 'Oh, we want to give individuals the things that they need to be successful'. It's saying, 'We want to make it so there are no grades,' for example."

Rose Godinez, interim legal director for the ACLU of Nebraska, said equity is about giving kids "a fair shot."

Leveling the playing field by doing away with prerequisites or eliminating college entrance exams is a reasonable response to systemic racism, she said.

Students of color are underrepresented in AP classes, and overrepresented in student discipline, arrests and referrals to law enforcement, she said.

"It's not a theory we're talking about, this is a reality that students of color are facing every day," she said.

The SAT and ACT exams don't measure the intelligence of a broader group of people, she said.

"By taking away those antiquated intelligence-measuring tests we're in no way making our schools less educational or recruiting a less intelligent workforce," Godinez said. "If anything, we are gaining a more diverse group of students that bring different experiences at the same intelligence level."

Matt Blomstedt, Nebraska commissioner of education, said the state must address achievement disparities based on race, ethnicity and socioeconomics.

People need to move from "admiring the problem" to fixing it, he said.

People shouldn't take for granted how great America is, he said, but "I don't think we're a perfect country on race."

He said people need to move away from framing things in terms of winners and losers.

"You don't always have to step on someone else to move up," Blomstedt said. "And I think that's what people are afraid of. Somebody loses. We can have conversations in education about equity or diversity or any of those things without having to put someone else down."