

# Educational Equity

*AIR helps reach talented students through supported learning*

BY PAMELA A. KEENE



▲ Tammie Causey-Konaté

**CREATING A TRULY LEVEL PLAYING FIELD FOR** learners of all types is not impossible, but it does take focus, effort and teamwork. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) works with communities, school districts and states to implement best practices to improve school climate and culture and to create positive conditions for learning. For all students to have equal access to learning, educators must understand children's individual strengths, needs and diverse backgrounds.

"Not every student learns the same way or is starting from the same place," says Tammie Causey-Konaté, Ph.D., deputy director of the Southeast Comprehensive Center at AIR, which works in five Southeastern states: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. "Unless we recognize and support those differences and provide educational equity for each of them, we are doing those students a disservice. Through our work at AIR, we're striving to balance the playing field for inclusive learning and improve student outcomes for all students."

Causey-Konaté points out that achieving educational equity means taking into consideration the many differences students, parents, teachers and the community bring to the educational table. "Then we must hear all the voices in the room to ensure that educational performance is not predicted in advance, but that access is equal for every student and that the supports provided leverage their particular assets as a way to meet their specific needs," she says.

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, increasing responsibility is given to states to provide the framework and processes to assure that all students have access to effective educators.

AIR's work around the country is changing the approach to providing accessible, equitable education by supporting school systems, districts and states to pinpoint their needs and identify solutions to current challenges. Those solutions include creating equity plans for schools so that they can begin to develop opportunities to improve access and conditions for learning for all students.

David Osher, Ph.D., is vice president and Institute Fellow at AIR. He is one of three editors of "Creating Safe, Equitable, Engaging Schools: A Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach to Supporting Students," released in November 2018. The book brings together topics and best practices to assist educators in fostering students' social, emotional and academic needs.

Osher says that educational equity invites active support and engagement from a variety of sources, including teachers, parents, and community and faith organizations. AIR has formed partnerships with community-based organizations across the country, such as Say Yes to Education/Cleveland, which addresses children's social, emotional and academic needs along with financial barriers to attending college. One of the group's missions is to provide scholarships.

"The work included creating conditions in the schools that would support students and coordinate community resources," Osher says. "And with the guarantee of paid college tuition, students knew that they have a viable path to post-secondary participation and success."

In North Carolina, AIR's Southeast Comprehensive Center partnered with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to ensure that teachers who work with English language learners receive effective professional development. In-depth assessments of professional learning experiences and related applications set the stage for refining the professional practices of educators across the state in a way that translates to educational equity in classrooms.

Schools need to be focused on making sure all students are included, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, and particularly if they are English language learners or receive special education services. "It is imperative that the principles of exclusion be suspended to enable students to thrive and flourish in their own manner," Osher says. "So many times these students are seen to have limited possibilities, and so they are overlooked or disregarded. Think of the talents and gifts that are dismissed otherwise. These students may even be told that 'this is not for you' and buy into

that thinking, further stifling their talents and gifts.”

Osher says inclusion must be a focus, whether it applies to a school setting or an organization such as AIR.

“The thinking of ‘We want you here because we respect you and you’ll make our organization even better because of your diversity’ is the right approach, but it goes much further than that,” he says. “The reality is that society is marked with ‘isms’ and prejudices that have not gone away, whether they are historic or unconscious. It is important to recognize and eliminate the mindsets associated with color, disabilities and social and psychological factors so that every student has equal access to learning.”

Creating a safe environment is crucial to educational equity, whether from a physical standpoint or an emotional and identity perspective. “We’ve spoken with students from a variety of backgrounds about how they felt about the educational condi-

tions,” he says. “We consistently heard that when they felt like they belonged and were valued and supported, they said that their teachers had their backs. And when they felt supported, they were more willing to be pushed to learn. They made it clear that they knew that people truly cared about them.”

Both Osher and Causey-Konaté acknowledge that achieving educational equity will not happen instantaneously but that significant progress is being made. “Through evidence-based practices we’re seeing the positive results for students, teachers, leadership and the community,” Causey-Konaté says. “When we take into consideration the cultural, environmental, emotional, psychological and geographic factors of each student and the way they learn, it will have far-reaching positive results, not only for the students but for society.”

To learn more about AIR’s work in educational equity, visit <https://www.air.org/search/site/Equity> ■



▲ David Osher



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