



NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

From the NEASC *Manual for School Improvement*: Standard 8 On Personalizing Learning and the Practice of Equity

Highlighted for Equity and Inclusion

STANDARD 8. Commitment to Inspiration and Support Characterizes the Approach to Each Student

The purpose of every accredited school is the healthy development of its students, “the kids,” as we say colloquially. This Standard speaks directly to the quality of the faculty’s relationship with the students and of the students among themselves. These are complex realities, observable in their full measure only over time and in various contexts.

For instance, teachers can – and often should – be “demanding” of students. How helpful a demand might be – in the short or long run – should be a continuously contemplated question. How demands are made is such a question. How an observer might evaluate demands is another. A demand can be made in stentorian tones. It can also be manifested in a relationship where doing less than one’s best just feels unacceptable.

A demanding teacher can be engaging, encouraging, enthusiastic, and empathetic. A demanding teacher can also be demeaning, didactic, derogatory, and dispiriting. A teacher seen as demanding by one student might be “pretty interesting” to another. Student assessment of the quality of demands made upon them can be helpful and also problematic. An “unfair” demand when one is twelve may resonate ten years later as the most important lesson one learned in school. An “engaging” teacher for a junior in high school may prove disappointing in the long run when a student discovers the course lacked rigor.

“Inspiration” and “support” – the key terms in this Standard – require considerable discussion to assess fairly and helpfully. Teaching and learning is often a balancing act between rigor and “relevance to me as a student right now.” Sometimes it is said that no one truly “teaches” a student – but that students can and do learn. Figuring out what will be most helpful to students who live upon a long continuum of interests, abilities, motivation, and curiosity is the art of this balance. A teacher must be engaged equally by the subject and by the student. This constant wondering about the quality of engagement contributes to the fascination of teaching and learning. And to the complexity of its assessment.

“Inspiration” and “support” are tools for analysis but not absolute states. They lie at the heart of the ongoing purposes of accreditation and also at the center of the challenge of accreditation.

Accreditation requires schools to reflect, discuss, research, test, and implement evolving assessments of the quality of the relationships between teachers and students and among students themselves. Some of these will be informal – “How was class today?” “How did that field trip really work out?” “Are you caught up on your reading assignments?”

Some assessments are formal: the annual review of faculty by a principal or department chair, the written student assessments of courses and teachers, and submitted lesson plans.

Each accredited school should write a narrative response to this Standard, including comments on the indicators. In sum, the Standard is asking: “How do we strive to inspire our kids?” “How do we support each student’s personal growth and development equitably?” “How do we respond to each student’s voice and active engagement in learning?” Specific examples from the experience of students and faculty should make up the bulk of the narrative.

This Standard is not a “checklist.” It is intended to provide an accredited school the opportunity to discuss the character of its approaches to its students in light of the goals of “inspiration” and “support.”

8.a. The school recognizes, values, and nurtures the unique reality of every student at each stage of development.

Students in accredited schools deserve fundamental understanding and appropriate care for their self-identities, abilities, exceptionalities, circumstances, interests, aspirations, and for their emotional, social, and physical realities. This consideration asks the school to reflect on how faculty and staff members demonstrate their understanding and capacity to work with the students enrolled in the school.

It asks to what degree the factors that contribute to a student’s self-identity, self-actualization, and abilities to live a full life and contribute meaningfully and purposefully to society, like aptitudes, talents, interests, hopes, and desires, as well as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and practices, political convictions, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and family life, are recognized, valued, and nurtured?

- How do faculty and staff observe, assess, and document individual students’ abilities, talents, and interests at different developmental stages?
- Do faculty and staff help students assess their own abilities, talents, and interests at different stages in their development?
- Does the school create personalized learning plans with short and long-term goals that address individual students’ strengths, weaknesses, skills, and knowledge?
- Are personalized learning plans regularly reviewed and discussed with students and their parents or guardians?
- Do faculty and staff provide individual students with personalized learning environments or experiences?
- How do the faculty and staff set demands and expectations for students and provide the right measures of inspiration, encouragement, and motivation?
- How are optimism and hope expressed?
- How do teachers and administrators address students needing correction, redirection, or changed behaviors?
- If students have specific health needs or learning challenges, do all persons who have “a need to know” in the community understand their role in support of the individual students?

8.b. The faculty and staff regularly monitor each student’s social and emotional development.

An accredited school is committed to educating the whole child. Students' academic, artistic, or athletic development may be more objectively assessed than social and emotional development. Yet, with the number of resources currently available to measure a student's social and emotional growth and maturity, and the keen and constant observation of the faculty and staff, regular attention should be given to each student's full and integral development.

This indicator requires schools to demonstrate that faculty understand age-appropriate student behaviors and that the school regularly and consistently finds ways to observe, evaluate, and support, the students' social and emotional maturity, including regular reporting to the student's parents or guardians, and as beneficial, to the students themselves. And it addresses the school's capacity to confront and address, as necessary, behaviors that are "outside the norm" of what is age-appropriate. Some schools will rely on classroom teachers to regularly monitor individual student's social and emotional development. Other schools will take a team approach with trained professionals, teachers, and members of the school's leadership team.

Because NEASC accredits schools enrolling students from ages three to twenty who fall on a broad spectrum of maturity and intellectual ability – from "gifted" to "challenged" – this indicator speaks to the importance of understanding, assessing, and creating approaches, programs, and social and emotional learning practices (SEL) that strengthen the emotional and social growth of the school's student population.

8. c. School culture promotes, supports, and celebrates the essential equity and inclusion of all students.

This consideration focuses on the school's culture – the expected behaviors, the consistency and tone of relationships and roles, the institutional norms, customs, traditions, and habits, and the deeply held commitment of every person to create a school community where each student feels an unambiguous sense of belonging, and where each member can positively affirm they are given fair, just, and equal opportunities.

The principal concept is that a school measures its culture in how individuals are greeted, accepted, and embraced by their peers, how classes are conducted, by the kinds of chatter one hears daily in the hallways, and the capacity of each student to access and take advantage of every appropriate activity, program, and opportunity with a sense of unquestionable welcome and belonging. No less important is what a school will not allow or tolerate for the sake of inclusion and equity, for instance, its rejection of bullying, harassment, hazing, discrimination, prejudice, racism, ostracization, meanness, ridicule, and shaming in all and any forms. This indicator is not asking about a school's policies but about the code of behavior embedded in the school's understood and lived culture that implicitly, and at times explicitly, denounces all that undermines equity and inclusion.

Schools celebrate what they value and what they want to cherish and raise up as examples of their ideals. In the course of a school year, many schools celebrate individuals, teams, activities, and events. This Standard asks about the school's culture of celebrating how it advances and achieves equity and how it demonstrates and upholds inclusion.

Schools are not perfect. This consideration asks the school to contemplate its strengths and challenges, noting its responses to events or incidents when students or faculty fall short of the goal. Schools that include a description of how difficult situations were handled rather than merely noting their successes demonstrate their understanding of the depth of the term "promote" in this indicator.

8.e. Students' perspectives and opinions are appropriately heard and addressed.

This indicator asks schools to assess how they “hear” students, understand their points of view, and respond appropriately. This indicator covers a very wide range of school philosophies and ages, and the term “appropriate” requires discussion and reflection. The line between an immature student outburst and a thoughtful, reasoned expression of concern requires faculty to develop a nuanced approach. An incendiary student newspaper article, a peaceful but persistent protest movement, an unsigned poster - or cruel graffiti - in the hallway, a request for a faculty member to support a friend – and a thousand more examples of students expressing themselves through language and behavior – all require faculty to listen for content and tone and intervene – or not – appropriately.

Schools should consider what formal and informal ways they hear their students’ voice. Many schools have student senates or councils that meet regularly. Others have advisory programs or defined ways students can speak openly and with teachers and adult members of the school community. Classroom teachers may regularly design assignments that elicit student expression of their opinions or design projects that prompt students to take a stand on issues and concerns in or outside the school. Student voice may be solicited when a school considers new courses or extracurricular activities. This is a matter of a school’s culture—who has a seat at the table, and what importance a school places on the perspectives of its students. No less, it is a matter of how students *know* that they have been heard, even if they disagree with the response they may have received.

Schools might also reflect on whether learning to listen and act appropriately with students is a key area of their faculty development.

8.f. Students and parents, as necessary, can access support to address their respective needs.

Schools possess highly diverse support for students and families. This indicator asks schools to examine their support services – academic, emotional, social, physical, creative, college, etc. – to ensure that communication and necessary engagement takes place. If parents have questions about a reported student interaction with faculty, how is that addressed? If faculty report concerning behaviors in class, what happens? If a child has ongoing counseling needs, how are they provided for and monitored? If students are having trouble in classes, how is this communicated, and to whom? How does the school assess whether or not support is adequate?

Also, where appropriate, schools should support parents’ and students’ entitlement to town or local services. In some communities, effective services for children and young people may be available that are not part of the school’s own capacity. Likewise, schools that develop effective partnerships with local social service providers and resources can be truly helpful to students and families.

8.g. Students are encouraged to engage actively in the life of the school.

How does the school promote inclusive programs? How are students placed in programs or encouraged to join appropriate activities? How are students introduced to activities and student organizations their family or cultural background may not have provided access to or awareness? This indicator asks schools to reflect on the culture of the school and on the programs – athletic, artistic, social, service, clubs, etc. – that are usually described as “co-curricular” or “extracurricular,” but that may be an integral part of the school’s total program. School programs almost always extend far beyond the classroom schedule. This consideration is not a measure of the variety or richness of the school’s programs, but of the ways the school works intentionally with individual students to enable them to discover and develop their talents, abilities, and skills. This indicator views “the life of the school” as both organized programs and more spontaneous school activities. Schools should reflect on this indicator through an equity lens.

8.h. The school strives to understand and respond to the realities of students' social and emotional experiences within and outside the school.

This consideration asks the school to assess how aware faculty and administration are of the social and emotional experiences students encounter both in and outside the school.

- Do students belong to particular “groups,” and what does this relationship entail?
- Are they “loners,” or do they have a small group of friends?
- What happens with the students are at home? This is often a large and complex subject for schools, and deciding when and how to intervene – or not – in a student’s home life often requires significant deliberation by appropriate school personnel.
- Are students working a job after – or even before – school?
- Are they living in two homes?
- Do they come home to an empty house?
- Are there any suggestions or evidence of abuse?
- Are there significant disagreements among family members that affect the students?
- Are they fed properly?
- What language is spoken at home?
- If they are international students, does the school effectively understand the realities of their homestay and American experience?
- Do students have adequate access to technology?

Schools might also consider the following:

- Students bring their full lives to the school. Understanding and appropriately embracing the total life experience of its students should be a central goal for an accredited school. Conduct interviews with students about their experiences with faculty, staff, and fellow students. Listen to what they say, seeking trends and themes. And attending to individual differences.
- Talk with parents about what their children tell them.
- Ask alumni how they reflect on their experiences a year or five years out.
- Construct a school-wide written assessment that heightens awareness of students’ social experiences.
- **Administer a school-wide assessment of equity, inclusion, and belonging.**
- Assign specific administrative responsibility to ensure constant discussion among faculty of their observations about students and plans of action, ensuring faculty understand the complexity of their students’ social experiences.

- How deeply does the school delve into the experiences of students outside the physical school? Is the school’s stance adequate to truly help children and young people who may face significant challenges beyond the boundaries of the campus?

8.i. The school’s practice of equity reduces the predictability of who succeeds and who fails by ensuring every learner has access to the resources they need when they need them.

Students thrive when they have an emotionally, socially, morally, and physically safe learning environment with all the attributes of an excellent accredited school: high expectations, rigorous content, engaging personalized instruction, well-prepared and highly competent professionally collaborative educators, comfortable student-centered classrooms, nutritious meals, regular physical activity, and the resources to support learning and the full student experience.

But often, students enter schools with deficits or inequities with respect to their peers—academically, socially, culturally, linguistically, and materially, to name a few. Students may not have had the same or comparable experiences or opportunities as their classmates, leading them to feel they are academically unprepared in knowledge, skills, and work habits or are social outsiders or “different.” They may even feel embarrassed by their background or circumstances.

Some students who have not had the same academic preparation as their peers, regardless of aptitude, may be assigned courses at a lower level and never attain to higher level courses. Faculty and staff may hold lower expectations for students who enter the school or their classroom with weaker preparation. Low expectations can weigh heavily on a student’s performance and follow a student throughout their academic career. Learning deficits and low teacher expectations can mark a student for failure.

This indicator asks accredited schools to reflect on how they address the needs of incoming students and the material, opportunity, and experience deficits of students as they may arise throughout their time at the school. Do faculty and staff practice equity of access, opportunity, and choice? Does the school provide access to resources every student needs at the time needed? Does the school ensure every student has the basic learning tools and resources they need—laptops, internet access at home, art supplies for artists, instruments for musicians, and such? Does the school provide “bridge classes” during the summer before entering the school for students with inadequate math or language preparation? Does the school ensure every student can cover additional costs of fieldtrips or participation on class trips? Does every student have adequate clothing and equipment to participate in all school activities, clubs, and sports? Does the school’s practice of equity ensure that all students receive the resources, supports, and advantages to succeed?

8.j. The school aspires and plans to strengthen its alignment with this Standard.

Required Materials:

A. **School Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Survey** (if appropriate and/or completed; many instruments assess student and faculty culture. NEASC asks that schools choose one appropriate to their Mission.)

B. Documentation describing specific services, programs, or activities such as:

- Learning Support services
- Language Support services

- Counseling and guidance support services
- Testing and placement – courses, programs, college application
- Other programs specific to the school