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Protecting access to public education

Inclusion and equity mean more than you realize – an editorial by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

Inclusion and equity have distinct and important meanings in the world of K-12 education, specifically when it comes to special education and meeting the needs of our students with disabilities. They are words that express our values as educators, they are words that come with significant legal underpinnings, and they are words that are currently being used to stoke fear and score political points. Our children are the ones who stand to lose that game.

We value inclusion, when students with disabilities and students without disabilities are taught together, because we know that every student is an important member of the school community, and that classrooms where everyone belongs are stronger, richer, and more effective classrooms. In legal terms, this means that students must have access to education in the “least restrictive environment” to “the maximum extent appropriate.” We value equity, where each student gets what they need in the way that they need it, over equality, where all students get the same, because we recognize that individual students have unique needs to address, barriers to overcome, and most importantly, strengths to build upon. In legal terms, this means that each student with a disability must have access to “free and appropriate public education” that meets their individual needs. To be clear, least restrictive environment and free and appropriate public education are the law. They are also good teaching.

Inclusion and equity are integral to special education, English language education, gifted education – all public education – because they give kids what they need to keep them engaged, challenged, and learning. This is what inclusion and equity actually mean in K-12 education, not what they have come to mean in a culture war perpetrated by people set on using public education to divide. Throwing words around without honoring their true meaning is dangerous. This rhetoric threatens the education of students with disabilities, and devalues the perspectives and strengths they bring to our classrooms. I don’t know if the

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people using these terms as vitriolic wedge issues are willfully misusing the words inclusion and equity, but it doesn't matter if it's intentional or unintentional; either way, our kids and their education are the collateral damage, and that is unacceptable.

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NOTE: Legal references can be found [on the DPI's website here](#). A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly is available [here on the DPI's website](#). This guest editorial is available electronically [here on the DPI's website](#).