

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: RACIAL JUSTICE AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Issue at a Glance

Of the 49.6 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in fall 2022, 22.1 million were white, 7.4 million were Black, 14.4 million were Hispanic, 2.7 million were Asian/Pacific Islander, approximately half a million were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2.5 million were two or more races. The percentage of students who were white decreased from 61% to 44% between fall 2000 and fall 2022, and it is projected to continue decreasing to 42% by fall 2031.

As of 2023, nearly 40% of students of color attended high-poverty schools. Segregation and redlining have caused these neighborhoods to also have lower property values, which results in fewer financial resources for their schools. In addition, according to a 2022 report by EdTrust, districts serving the largest populations of students of color receive, on average, about \$2,700 less per student in state and local funding than school districts that predominantly serve white districts—in a district with 5,000 students, that's a \$13.5 million gap in resources.

Because many students have not been afforded equitable learning opportunities, average reading scores and math scores have been lower for students of color on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than their white peers since 1992. U.S. schools have also reported persistent racial gaps in other academic achievement measures, graduation rates, and postsecondary education. But a recent report from the Learning Policy Institute highlighted school districts in California that are closing the opportunity gap, and whose students of color are achieving at higher levels than their peers in other districts. Some of the factors in common included a widely shared, well-enacted vision that prioritizes learning for each child; continuous leadership from instructionally engaged leaders; systemic supports for students' academic, social, and emotional needs; and engagement of families and communities.

While many school leaders have made great strides to ensure educational equity for each student, the education system has still perpetuated harmful policies and practices such as exclusionary discipline, inadequate access to experienced educators, lack of a diverse curriculum, inequitable funding and staffing in schools serving large numbers of students of color, tracking, and school segregation. Additionally, there has been a backlash in recent years to any critical discussions of race and educational equity in schools. A 2024 analysis by The Washington Post found that 23 states passed new restrictions on discussion of race in schools since 2021, affecting 34% of students ages 5–19.

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National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association condemns structural racism that unfortunately persists in our society, including in education spaces, and calls on school leaders to embrace striving toward a more just and equitable education system.
- National Principals Association believes that principals have the power to identify racism and advocate against it to uplift students and staff of color and ultimately construct a better school and society.
- At its core, equity is a commitment to civil rights and human connectedness. It is the behaviors, systems, processes, resources, and environments that ensure each member of the school community is provided with individualized learning and growth opportunities. It is the process by which school leaders guarantee that each person is valued and treated justly and receives a high-quality education.
- National Principals Association supports the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which state that effective leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
- National Principals Association has additional policy issue briefs on [Culturally Responsive Schools](#), [Educator Diversity](#), and [Poverty and Its Impact on Students](#) and [School Discipline](#), which offer additional recommendations for policymakers and school leaders to promote student equity and help each student achieve their greatest potential.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Fully fund Title I of ESSA, which provides funds to school districts to help historically marginalized students—two-thirds of whom are students of color—with reading, language arts, and mathematics instruction through schoolwide approaches or targeted assistance strategies.
- Fulfill Congress's obligation of full funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by appropriating 40% of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities.
- Fully fund Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which can be used to strengthen school leader preparation programs and professional learning opportunities to better support students of color.
- In the next Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), adjust formula-funded programs to ensure that a higher proportion is allocated to high-poverty states and districts and explore how the law's provisions can assist states and districts in addressing racial injustice in our school systems.
- Offer incentives for states to conduct racial equity audits, address racial disparities resulting from gaps in educational opportunity, and develop a framework for assessing resource disparity in all education policies and programs.
- Provide adequate funding for the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, whose mission is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation through effective enforcement of civil rights.
- Enforce comparability provisions in ESSA to ensure districts and schools serving students of color have access to fully certified, experienced, and effective school leaders and teachers.

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- Create a competitive grant program to increase the enrollment and support the performance of students of color in advanced courses and programs.
- Authorize a federal grant program for states to modernize, innovate, renovate, or repair public school facilities to be safe, healthy, high performing, and technologically up to date.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Invest in school districts serving a high proportion of students of color and low-income students, improve transparency and school funding formulas to better target funding to students of color, and adopt other policies to address racial inequities in schools.
- Utilize statewide longitudinal data systems to provide information disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and income status to identify trends in student attendance, college readiness, and other educational equity issues across the P-20 pipeline.
- Encourage school leader preparation programs to hire faculty with experience in teaching about race and inequality; embed coursework on race and racism throughout the curriculum; help principals lead culturally responsive schools; and provide candidates with ongoing mentoring and support, networking, and other professional learning opportunities upon completion.
- Incentivize teacher preparation programs to help candidates understand their own racial biases and develop skills to create inclusive and culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms and school environments that address the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students.
- Collect and publicly report data on teacher certification, experience, and effectiveness and assignments at the district level and within schools and develop a plan to address disparities in access for students of color.
- Provide funding for districts to offer more gifted and talented, AP/IB, and dual-enrollment opportunities, and universally screen and enroll all high-achieving students in these advanced courses.
- Offer opportunities for student leaders of diverse backgrounds to have a voice in state-level policy discussions such as through participation on state boards of education or other advisory groups.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Adopt a districtwide definition of educational equity that aligns with state equity definitions in collaboration with community members that applies to all school leaders, educators, and staff in every school.
- Establish interview and hiring goals and offer professional development opportunities for district staff to ensure that district hiring practices eliminate racial bias and discrimination through transparent and explicit hiring criteria, advertisements of job openings to diverse communities, and an interview and selection process that begins in the spring.
- Ensure that curriculum content, instructional materials, and assessments are inclusive of minority history and culture, prevent racial bias, and expose students to diverse perspectives and worldviews.

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- Promote racial and socioeconomic diversity in schools and classrooms by analyzing student assignments, course enrollment, participation in cocurricular activities, and transportation patterns in schools.
- Develop a framework for school leaders to help them ensure diverse perspectives are included in decision-making processes and solutions that will have a positive impact on students of color.
- Ensure that principals and teachers have professional development opportunities and coaching to help them assess their own cultural viewpoints and biases, set high expectations for all students, acknowledge diverse learning preferences, use culturally responsive pedagogy, and effectively engage diverse families and community members.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Clearly articulate racial justice and educational equity as a goal for your school and foster a school climate that encourages equitable education practices.
- Review curricula to make sure they are culturally and linguistically inclusive and examine school-level disaggregated data and policies on grading, discipline, and access and participation in advanced courses with the goal of eliminating inequities.
- Familiarize yourself with culturally responsive pedagogy, support teachers in their efforts to update their teaching practices and consider new teachers' knowledge and support of culturally responsive teaching in your hiring decisions.