

# Public School Forum of North Carolina Report on Education Opportunity

*This week's Advocacy Update includes the recommendations from the second committee of the Public School Forum's Study Group XVI in response to the question "What would it take to give every child in North Carolina the opportunity to receive a sound basic education?"*

## Committee on Racial Equity: Recommendations

The Committee divided its work into seven domains derived from preliminary research of national trends in race and education and utilized as frames when studying North Carolina. The following section summarizes the recommendations of the committee.

The intention of this report is to offer a thorough examination of racial inequity in North Carolina Public Schools, with a focus on generating feasible and plausible solutions to the problems. Members of the committee have dedicated themselves to actively researching the issues and scouring the regional and national landscape for exemplars. They have produced several recommendations focused on some level of policymaking: school, district or school board, and state.

It should be noted that some variation of the propositions contained herein may already be in place in specific districts or schools. In this case, it is our hope to expand on these ideas to create more widespread change throughout the state. The Public School Forum identified the need to lift race as a focal point of public education in the 2016 Top 10 Education Issues, and has already been in discussion with local education agencies seeking to address racial disparities. Additionally, we are represented on the Department of Instruction's Discipline Data Working Group. But our earnest desire is to seek board-based change in the racially disparate outcomes within the state's education system. We offer the following recommendations to achieve those ends:

## Resegregation

**1. Utilize socioeconomic integration models to diversify schools and prevent resegregation.** Race and class are strongly correlated. As a result, policies that assign students to schools according to socioeconomic variables can also increase racial diversity. The Supreme Court has rejected student assignment policies based solely on race, but it has determined that promoting diversity and avoiding racial isolation are appropriate factors to consider in developing student assignment policy.<sup>28</sup>

Wake County was one of the first systems in the nation to use this approach, and has been held up as a national model. Districts including Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, which had a racial quota in its assignment policy that was struck down by the Supreme Court, have remained integrated even without the option of race-based policies.<sup>29</sup> Using a formula that takes into account household income, family composition, educational attainment of parents, and other factors, Jefferson County has managed to create one of the more racially diverse systems in the country, and its approach to diversity is widely credited with contributing to a thriving local economy.

According to a 2016 Century Foundation report, 91 districts and charter networks across the country have voluntarily adopted socioeconomic factors as a factor in the student assignment.<sup>30</sup> This represents a growing trend among school systems seeking to promote diversity in student assignment and avoid racial isolation. Whereas some more rural or homogenous areas make this unattainable it should be pursued wherever possible.

**2. Create citywide (non-neighborhood based) student assignment policies to curb residential segregation and eliminate racially-isolated geographic areas.** The racial composition of certain neighborhoods within America's cities is in large part an artifact of discriminatory practices. Through years of redlining, blockbusting, and steering by real estate agents, intentional residential segregation fostered racially monolithic parts of town.<sup>31</sup> Against this

backdrop, recent pushes for “neighborhood schools” may perpetuate or reinforce longstanding racial segregation.

School policy and housing policy are interdependent. Recent research suggests that if school systems take the lead in delinking neighborhoods from schools, the housing sector will follow and in turn become more racially diverse.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, organizations like OneMECK (a Charlotte-based organization that focuses on ending policies and practices that lead to highly-concentrated poverty in schools and housing) work with city and county leaders to advocate for affordable housing and inclusionary zones to help break up poverty density in city neighborhoods, leading to increased diversity in schools.

## Opportunity Gap

**1. Adopt “community schools” models that leverage partnerships with service providers.** School partnerships with providers that help meet critical needs of students and their families, can also help develop and sustain school-community connections.

In a community schools model, the school is not simply part of the community but central to it, becoming a hub for the identification of student and family needs and for the provision of services that help students engage productively in schools and family members provide needed support. For example, in Jennings, Missouri, Superintendent Tiffany Anderson successfully turned around a racially isolated, high poverty district by adopting a holistic approach that “[used] the tools of the school district to alleviate the barriers poverty creates.”<sup>33</sup> In partnership with a nearby university, the school opened a clinic that offered mental health counseling, case management, and wellness education. The district also ran a food pantry for families, and provided training for teachers on the issues of institutional racism and poverty. This school is just one of many examples of utilizing partnerships to provide what schools cannot offer their students and families alone.<sup>34</sup> In Rowan-Salisbury Schools, the district tackled food insecurity over the summer by delivering meals to families utilizing a renovated bus — affectionately called “the Yum-Yum Bus.”<sup>35</sup>

**2. Create district equity departments with executive-level leadership.** There are only a few districts in North Carolina that have prioritized equity, diversity or inclusion to the extent that they have dedicated this level of specific support for it. More than merely stating a goal or mentioning equity in a mission statement, districts must begin to operationalize their stated dedication to racial equity by placing district leaders in charge of elevating the issues, providing anti-racism training, monitoring data for racial disparities, and holding schools accountable for equity outcomes. Currently, there are fewer than 5 districts out of 115 in North Carolina that have such a dedicated department or leadership role. School boards also have a critical role to play in making racial equity part of their strategic plan and putting accountability measures in place for closing the various opportunity gaps.

## Discipline Disparities

**1. Require all schools and districts to publish annual discipline reports disaggregated by race** with cross-tabulation. The State Board of Education should convene expert stakeholders to critique the categories of discipline data currently collected. The Board should also determine categorical designations for offenses to be tracked and published as part of the annual report, with an eye toward transparency and dissemination of meaningful data to the public. North Carolina is better than many other states in the level and depth of its consolidated discipline report, but schools and districts are not obligated to provide similarly nuanced information to their constituency.

A crucial objective of student discipline reports must be to help safeguard student rights by shining a light on areas of disproportionality or disparity as well as laud successes gained. At a minimum, discipline reports should include data on all significant disciplinary actions that list types of infractions (with specific and standardized definitions), track instructional time missed, and allow cross-tabulation and analysis of data by subgroup. This

entails not only comparing students of different race, but also for instance black or Hispanic economically disadvantaged students to white non-economically disadvantaged students. Reports of this nature will go a long way toward earning the trust of communities of color by ensuring that trends and patterns will be analyzed to see which schools are moving toward more equitable student discipline practices. Guilford County School's annual accountability report is an excellent template to follow.

**2. Implement Restorative Justice and Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS)** as alternative and preventative measures of discipline. In recent years, as data has exposed racial disparities in student discipline, schools have been experimenting with alternatives to suspensions and zero tolerance policies. But decreasing gaps takes more than just a reduction in overall disciplinary actions. Restorative Justice programs like those in Oakland Unified School District have proven to be effective in decreasing the overall incidence of student misbehavior as well as reducing racial gaps.<sup>36</sup> Restorative Justice is not an alternative for disciplinary action but rather an intervention prior to escalation. It provides whoever committed the wrong the chance to be held accountable by the community of students affected, and it allows those individuals to determine what must be done to reconcile.

PBIS is a multi-level approach to dealing with student attitudes and behavior.<sup>37</sup> Its tiers focus on collective school-wide, classroom, and individual student-level supports. Data collected on PBIS should include data on race, since the behavioral intervention alone might alter disciplinary practices but not close gaps. On a broader level, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a process that deals with emotional intelligence and helps students develop the competencies to identify and interpret their own emotions and the emotions of others, set and pursue goals, empathize, develop positive peer relationships, and learn how to self-regulate and interact effectively in social contexts.<sup>38</sup> Combined, these two approaches give schools a range of tools to help students learn appropriate learning behaviors through methods beyond punishment and push-out.

## Overrepresentation in Special Education

**1. Develop referral and initial evaluation process that take cultural differences into account** when assessing students for disabilities. Students of color are overrepresented in the specific categories of special education that are deemed most "stigmatizing," including intellectual disabilities, emotionally disturbances, and specific learning disabilities. Misidentification may be reinforced by stereotypes that people of color are intellectually inferior. Both the United States Department of Education and researchers have called for greater account of cultural differences in special education evaluation processes and interventions to address students' special needs.<sup>39</sup>

Of course evaluation is only part of the process. The emphasis here should also be placed on helping students of color with disabilities and their families in a way that is not inherently oppressive by perpetuating a cycle which often misinterprets learning styles of racial minorities. Ensuring that all personnel involved with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Response to Intervention (RTI) process have been trained in and understand systemic racism and overrepresentation. In addition, students in overrepresented groups should be given opportunities at regular intervals to be reevaluated and potentially exit the system. Currently the frequency is once every one-to-three years, generally speaking.<sup>40</sup> This policy likely needs revision. This would serve as a way to decrease overrepresentation brought on by failure to account for cultural differences, which would in turn direct scarce resources where they are truly needed and provide incentives for students who have the capacity to work toward the goal of exiting services.

## Access to Rigorous Courses and Programs

**1. Adopt universal screening processes for academically gifted programs** so referral systems are as objective and inclusive as feasible, and to reduce unnecessary variance in practice by district. A standardized process that sets parameters but allows flexibility for the unique nature of communities is paramount. Broward County Schools (FL) reduced racial gaps in identification of gifted programs by utilizing a universal screening process that

assessed all second-graders.<sup>41</sup> This replaced a system of parental or teacher referral. Paradise Valley (AZ) Unified School District has created a gifted identification system that responds to the needs of the community.<sup>42</sup> The district uses a multifaceted identification process and embeds a gifted specialist in each of the district's elementary schools to train teachers and staff to recognize high potential. With a large Hispanic population that often gets overlooked, the schools identify students using measures and assessments free of cultural or linguistic bias. As a result, the non-white gifted population has doubled in 2007. We recommend that North Carolina districts evaluate similar approaches to AIG identification processes in order to improve racial equity and improve access to AIG offerings. Making the assessments multidimensional (not relying exclusively on test scores), focusing on potential and not just performance, and looking at subjects beyond just reading and math could all prove beneficial. Districts should adopt similar process for access to advanced coursework.

**2. Train teachers and counselors on the “belief gap.”** Emerging research has revealed the significance of the belief gap (also referred to as the Pygmalion Effect): frequently, the absence of students of color in rigorous courses is not the result of an objective lack of readiness, but is instead due to teachers and counselors subjectively determining that students are not well-suited for the courses.<sup>43</sup> This lack of belief in children of color denies them access to important stepping stones to academic excellence, with deleterious effects on their outcomes in K-12 education and beyond.<sup>44</sup> Training on the belief gap can help teachers and counselors understand what to look for when assessing readiness for advanced coursework.

**3. Audit course enrollments to spotlight racial disparities** in honors, AP, and other rigorous courses. As an accountability measure, schools should undertake regular audits of course enrollments that analyze disparities in enrollment numbers among racial subgroups and that critically examine the criteria being used by teachers and counselors to determine student readiness for advanced coursework. If racialized gaps emerge that expose differential treatment, immediate interventions should be instituted to make the numbers more equitable and give all student equal opportunity of access.

## Diversity in Teaching

**1. Develop a fellowship program that incentivizes people of color to become teachers** and offers them support to stay in the profession long-term. The number of young people entering the teaching pipeline is decreasing in North Carolina. Policymakers and practitioners are considering a number of strategies to widen the teacher pipeline, but too few of the policies focus specifically on attracting teachers to high-need schools who share the racial and cultural backgrounds of those schools' students.

Thankfully, there are a host of examples throughout the country worthy of emulation. Programs like Profound Gentlemen (Charlotte, NC) is an incentive-based program designed to retain male educators of color through peer development, community building, and career opportunities.<sup>45</sup> In a little over two years, the program has developed the largest network of black male teachers in the country. Other programs like Call Me MISTER (Clemson, SC) and African American Teacher Fellows (Charlottesville, VA) seek to offer financial incentives that attract teachers of colors.<sup>46</sup> The New York City Public Schools has launched the NYCMenTeach program, which is similarly designed to attract Black and Hispanic male teachers to the profession.<sup>47</sup> We recommend that school boards and district- and state-level policymakers consider supporting similar models to boost recruitment of teachers of color in North Carolina.

**2. Create teacher preparation pathways for communities of color** that begin recruiting prospective teachers in high school, and that expand lateral entry opportunities for professionals from minority groups who show interest and promise as potential educators. Efforts to attract students of color early in their academic careers have shown promise as a model for bringing more of these students into the profession.<sup>48</sup> As such, targeted efforts to recruit people of color by tailoring programs like the North Carolina Teacher Cadet program and the recently discontinued North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program to minority candidates could prove valuable in rapidly building up this important segment of the future teaching pool. Additionally, the state should make it as

efficient as possible for those in other professions who would like to become teachers to do so, without sacrificing the quality of teacher preparation.

## **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

**1. Adopt a set of standards for culturally relevant teaching** to assist teachers in understanding what competencies are needed to effectively instruct students of color. In the same way that there are language standards for English Language Learners with Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), there should be research-based standards for cultural relevance and responsive pedagogy. The purposes of such standards would be to help teachers learn to instruct in ways that honor the customs, norms and traditions of all students; embed the diverse perspectives and histories of communities of color within the curriculum; and utilize these perspectives to inform best practices. Identifying competencies for teachers to aspire to will give practitioners a clearer picture of what equitable instruction should look like for students of color. This must be done with the understanding standards alone don't change practice, but the level of responsiveness to students' needs is what actually lead to competence. The focus should be on the application of cultural relevance by the instructor. Teacher preparation programs should use the standards to reassess their curriculum and to develop new course offerings, since efforts to boost racial awareness will be particularly impactful during teacher pre-service training.<sup>49</sup> Creating space for students to discuss race, choosing materials that reflect the communities of the children served, and factoring in worldviews other than those of traditional westernized societies are example of strategies that standards-aligned training can provide that will improve teachers' ability to properly address cultural divides through pedagogy.<sup>50</sup>

**2. Implicit racial bias training for teachers and administrators** to help break habits of prejudice and lead to more balanced treatment of students of color. Most of the racial disparities in discipline, special education, and AIG and advanced course enrollment are not the result of malicious intent as much as deep-seated, unconscious biases. But just because this type of racial bias is unintended does not mean it is harmless.<sup>51</sup> It is crucial for local school boards and district leaders to take affirmative steps to help educators deconstruct implicit racial bias and understand the nature of systemic racism. Research has shown that undergoing such training can lead to dramatic reductions in bias.<sup>52</sup> Guilford County Schools has been a leader in this area, with nearly more than 50 of their 127 schools participating in implicit racial bias training. We recommend that all other districts provide similar opportunities to their teachers and staff to help offset the impact of implicit bias on educational outcomes for minority students.

*Source : [www.ncforum.org](http://www.ncforum.org)*