



*Progress is possible.
Back to normal is not
good enough.*

Achieving Racial Justice in PreK-12 Education

John B. King Jr. and Denise Forte

The road to achieving racial justice in our nation is marked by times of unspeakable tragedy followed by resilience and recovery and unexpected setbacks overcome by reinvention. Our family stories provide undeniable proof that progress is possible. For example, in just three generations, John's family went from being enslaved in a cabin in Montgomery County, Maryland, to being represented in the Cabinet of the nation's first Black president.

The road to racial justice in education is much the same. Enslaved people being denied the chance to read or write and their descendants denied the chance to sit in integrated classrooms or walk the campuses of public institutions are all horrid vestiges of our past. Yet today, descendants of the enslaved are intellectual powerhouses on the campuses of these same institutions, shaping the educational excellence of generations to

come. Again, incontestable evidence that progress is possible.

As the nation emerges from a devastating and deadly pandemic, we stand again on the precipice of recovery and reinvention. Many school districts have returned to normal, with the majority of students and teachers back in the classroom. Yet what is needed to propel us toward a more just society is a collective understanding that we cannot just go back to normal. The pandemic illuminated a narrative that the advocates for racial justice in education have been working tirelessly to both highlight and change: Normal was not good enough, especially for students of color. And despite much progress in providing opportunities and access in service of educational equity, disturbing racial inequities remain.

These inequities stand squarely in the way of achieving racial justice in schools. As long as students of color remain less

likely to be assigned to the strongest teachers,¹ less likely to have access to school counselors,² and less likely to be enrolled in advanced coursework,³ schools are not preparing all students for college and career success. As long as Black students are more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline,⁴ and Black girls are five times more likely than White girls to be suspended at least once from school,⁵ school discipline policies are derailing learning for countless students. And as long as districts with the most Black, Latino, and Native American students continue to spend almost \$2,000 less per student per year in state and local funding than districts with mostly White students,⁶ state funding formulas are robbing communities of color of much-needed resources (figure 1).

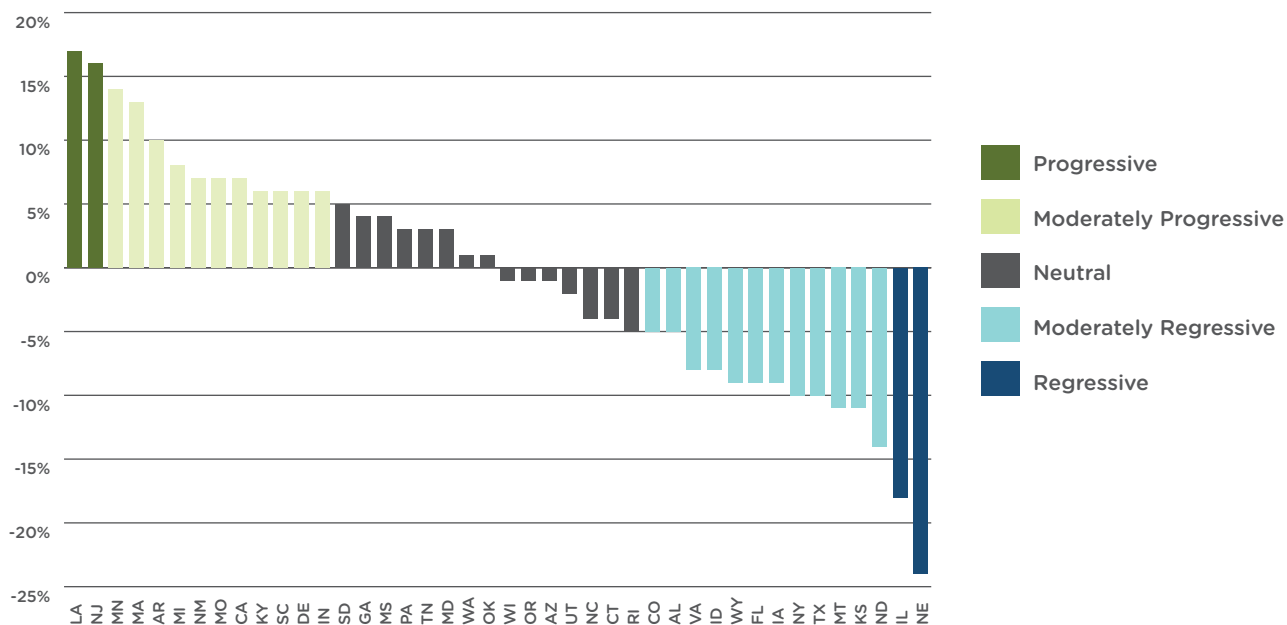
In a racially just education system, these disparities would not exist. Students of color

would have all the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to succeed and thrive. They would be exposed to outstanding, diverse, caring educators who have high expectations for them and believe in their capacity to succeed. They would feel welcomed in their school environments by adults who affirm their cultural identities and recognize the strengths and assets of all students. They would benefit from leaders who are not afraid to confront their own biases and who know that doing so is essential to supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development. And an equitable, racially just K-12 funding system would provide *significantly more* dollars to districts to meet the needs of students who have been underserved for years.

As regulators and advocates, state boards of education have a crucial role to play in creating

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Figure 1. Gaps in State and Local Revenues per Student between Districts Serving the Most and the Fewest Students of Color



Reading this figure: In states shaded in green, the highest poverty districts receive at least 5 percent more in state and local funds per student than the lowest poverty districts; in states shaded in blue, they receive at least 5 percent less. Gray shading indicates similar levels of funding for the highest and lowest poverty districts. This figure shows that Illinois' highest poverty districts received 19 percent less in state and local funds than its lowest poverty districts. **Note:** Data from Ohio are excluded from this chart because of anomalies in the way Ohio reported its fiscal data to the federal government. Hawaii was excluded because it is one district, the District of Columbia was excluded because it is not a state, and Alaska and Nevada are also excluded because their student populations are heavily concentrated in certain districts and could not be sorted into quartiles. Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and West Virginia are also excluded because students of color make up less than 10 percent of enrollment in these states.

Source: The Education Trust

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and maintaining a racially just system, from setting the requirements for teacher and school leader preparation programs so they foster a diverse workforce, to establishing statewide learning standards that require culturally relevant teaching and curriculum. State education leaders also have the power to ensure that such policies do not fall victim to politically driven, misguided attacks, such as the slew of opportunistic state legislative bans against teaching the truth of our nation's history under the cynical banner of opposing critical race theory. These bans take away educators' ability to acknowledge the hard parts of U.S. history and students' rights to learn about them. As the nation continues its reckoning on racism and racial injustice, schools have to be places where critical conversations around unjust systems are not just required but welcomed.

Whether it be in our nation, education system, state, or district, achieving racial justice is possible. It demands unwavering leadership committed to pursuing ideals despite unexpected setbacks and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. There is no set formula or framework; there is only resilience and reinvention. At every challenge, leaders must be willing to make decisions that put the needs of students who are the most vulnerable first. In the wake of what has inarguably been an equity disaster and one of the most challenging periods for many students, educators, and communities of color, state boards should focus on a few priorities as this school year begins: leveraging new federal funding; social, emotional, and academic development; educator diversity; and early childhood education.

COVID-19 Relief Funds

Money alone will not solve the deeply embedded systemic inequities students face. Yet when used strategically, it can act as a catalyst for change. Over the past year, the federal government has made an unprecedented investment in education—approximately \$195 billion for K-12 education—by way of COVID-19 relief funds. The American Rescue Plan Act alone provides states and districts with about \$125 billion. This influx must be directed toward eradicating pre-COVID inequities, which means targeting dollars to the schools and districts

that need it most to reverse the many decades of underfunding and doing so in a way that mobilizes the right combination of resources.⁷

It is essential to engage communities of color in the decision making around how federal funding will be used to support students and redesign public education to ensure that all students are prepared for college and career success. Fortunately, the federal government is requiring states to do this as a condition of receiving federal dollars. Too often, leaders fail to involve families of color in creating the policies that impact them or to center their input when considering changes to existing policies. That must change.

Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Even before the pandemic, educators were stepping up efforts to address students' social and emotional well-being. In the wake of the pandemic and tragic, recurrent displays of racial injustice, this need has been heightened. Yet while many schools and districts report they are supporting students' social and emotional learning, many are not doing so in ways that support growth for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

When researchers at our organization, The Education Trust, asked students and families of color what they felt would support student's social and emotional development, they said it was more critical to address systemic racism in schools than to adopt stand-alone socioemotional skill-building curricula.⁸ Instead of focusing on changing student behavior, leaders should thus focus on shifting adult mind-sets to recognize the strengths and assets of all students and on changing systems and policies. Too often, the focus is on fixing kids and not on fixing systems.

State leaders should ask themselves if policies meant to support students' social and emotional well-being are creating a system that fosters student belonging, helps students thrive, and provides the academic and holistic supports students need. Do students of color see themselves in the curriculum—that is, in the narrative of history presented or in the authors they study? Are students of color more likely to be suspended out of school, or are there

disparities in how some students are disciplined for the same infraction? These are the sorts of questions that will help leaders shift their focus from correcting individual student behavior to improving the learning environment.

Educator Equity and Diversity

In a racially just education system, students of color would also see themselves in those teaching in the classroom and leading schools. And all students would have the chance to be taught by diverse educators. The benefits of students learning from diverse educators are well-known (see article, page 17).⁹ Yet state leaders still struggle to recruit and retain teachers of color, leaving many public schools without any teacher of color on record. In fact, in one-third of the 33 states that make student-level data available, more than one in three students attend a school without a single teacher of color.¹⁰ At the same time, targeted state policies and programs to promote educator diversity vary widely across states, making it difficult for state leaders to know with certainty what works best to recruit, retain, and support teachers of color.

State leaders looking to make measurable progress in recruiting and retaining more teachers of color must have access to useful, timely workforce data to set goals and lay out a path for improvement. Using research-backed policy and practice criteria, they also must be able to assess the quality of educator diversity policies in their state. They can start by asking if the policies in their state are doing the following:

- providing visible, actionable data on the diversity of the educator workforce;
- setting clear goals for increasing the racial diversity of the workforce;
- investing in educator preparation programs to increase enrollment and improve the preparation of teachers of color;
- targeting resources to districts and schools for efforts to recruit and hire a diverse teaching workforce; and
- investing in efforts to retain teachers of color, including improving working conditions and providing opportunities for personal and professional growth for teachers of color.

While Ed Trust's policy scan finds that no

state is fully meeting every aspect of these criteria, many are implementing promising practices from which equity-focused state leaders can learn.¹¹

Once established, maintaining effective policies will be critical. As states inevitably face tough budget decisions down the road, many schools and districts will face pressures that imperil their teacher diversity efforts. In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2009, schools serving more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds bore the brunt of hiring freezes and layoffs. Teachers of color are particularly vulnerable to layoffs because they are more likely to be novice teachers, concentrated in high-needs schools, and subjected to systemic and overt racism. State leaders committed to a more equitable, racially just system must protect educators of color from disproportionate staffing cuts and hiring freezes, which may require overriding seniority-based layoff requirements.

Early Childhood Education

The benefits of high-quality early childhood education reach well into adulthood. Yet early childhood education is not treated as a public good on par with K-12 education. The Biden administration's push for targeted investments to expand access to universal pre-K is encouraging and long overdue. Unsurprisingly, the racial inequities and opportunity gaps that plague the K-12 system exist in early childhood as well. When states do fund high-quality preschool programs, Black and Latino children have less access to them. In a report examining the accessibility and quality of state-funded preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-old Black and Latino children, Ed Trust researchers found that no state provides high-quality and high-access early childhood education for these children.¹² A racially just education system must address these disparities.

State leaders, including state boards, have an important role in helping develop and support a high-quality early educator workforce. They can use their leverage to ensure better training and compensation. Early educators are essential to the national social and care infrastructure, but policies consistently undervalue them and uphold systemic racial and gender inequities.

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Even before the pandemic, childcare workers were some of the lowest paid in the nation. Almost half of the early education workforce relies on public assistance programs.¹³ More than one in six female childcare workers lives below the poverty line, and Black and Latina childcare workers with children of their own are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line.¹⁴

To be sure, racial pay disparities existed before the pandemic. Even when controlling for education level, Black early educators earn an average of 78 cents less per hour than their White counterparts.¹⁵ Latina early educators are more likely than their White or Black peers to work in assistant teacher or aide roles and less likely to work as a teacher. Compensation is especially low for educators who care for infants and toddlers—whose brains are developing most rapidly—and this low pay disproportionately affects Black educators.¹⁶

Learning from Schools and Districts

While much remains to be done to achieve racial justice and equity in our education system, there are schools and districts all over the country where longstanding inequities are no longer a part of the narrative. In these environments, Black, Latino, and Native American children, and children whose families face economic hardships have the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to thrive. And it shows in the data. For years, Ed Trust has been telling the stories of high-performing, rapidly improving schools and, most recently, districts, where students of color and students from low-income backgrounds continuously outperform their peers. In episodes of the ExtraOrdinary Districts podcast, educators and school and district leaders share what they know about developing systems and changing their practices and processes to meet the needs of the students who have faced the most systemic injustices.

When the pandemic started, these proven leaders shared what they were doing to continue meeting students' needs. Buoyed by the confidence of knowing first-hand that progress is possible despite seemingly insurmountable odds, they went to work—determined not to fail but committed to being truthful too. “We’re brave, not perfect,” was one principal’s motto for her

team. “It’s hard every day,” said another leader, “but we know what we have to do as a district to keep us moving forward.” That message is one that should inspire state leaders committed to creating a more equitable education system: It’s hard every day, but you too know what we need to do as a nation to keep us moving forward toward racial justice in our schools. ■

¹Rachel Metz and Allison Rose Socol, “Tackling Gaps in Access to Strong Teachers” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, October 2017).

²“School Counselors Matter” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, February 2019).

³Kayla Patrick, Allison Socol, and Ivy Morgan, “Inequities in Advanced Coursework: What’s Driving Them and What Leaders Can Do” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, January 2020).

⁴U.S. Government Accountability Office, “K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities,” GAO-18-258 (Washington, DC: GAO, March 22, 2018).

⁵Kayla Patrick, Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, and Nancy Duchesneau, “And They Cared: How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust and National Women’s Law Center, August 2020), <https://edtrust.org/resource/and-they-cared-how-to-create-better-safer-learning-environments-for-girls-of-color/>.

⁶Ivy Morgan and Ary Amerikaner, “Funding Gaps 2018: An Analysis of School Funding Equity Across the U.S. and Within Each State” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, February 2018).

⁷Alliance for Resource Equity, “Dimensions of Resource Equity,” web page, <https://www.educationresourceequity.org/dimensions>.

⁸Nancy Duchesneau, “Social, Emotional, and Academic Development through an Equity Lens” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, August 2020).

⁹Seth Gershenson et al., “The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers,” Working Paper 25254 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018); Constance Lindsay and Cassandra Hart, “Exposure to Same-Race Teachers and Student Disciplinary Outcomes for Black Students in North Carolina,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39, no. 3 (2017): 485–510.

¹⁰Education Trust, “Is Your State Prioritizing Teacher Diversity & Equity?” online data tool, <https://edtrust.org/educator-diversity/>.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Carrie Gillespie, “Young Learners, Missed Opportunities: Ensuring That Black and Latino Children Have Access to High-Quality State-Funded Preschool” (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, November 2019).

¹³Marcy Whitebook, Deborah Phillips, and Carollee Howes, “Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study,” Executive Summary (University of California, Berkeley: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2014).

¹⁴Julie Vogtman, “Undervalued: A Brief History of Women’s Care Work and Child Care Policy in the United States” (Washington, DC: National Women’s Law Center, 2017).

¹⁵Lea J.E. Austin et al., “Racial Wage Gaps in Early Education Employment” (University of Berkeley: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, December 19, 2019).

¹⁶Ibid.

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