

Background on Ad Hoc Committee

The Education Coalition Ad Hoc Committee on Racial Justice was established in the fall of 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd. The Coalition's Leadership committee determined that our collective must dedicate time, funding, and resources to produce structural change. To that end, the leaders of the Education Coalition's member organizations directed staff to identify opportunities for the Coalition to provide leadership in dismantling the systemic and structural racism that exists in California public schools.

The Ad Hoc Committee considered different opportunities to begin uprooting structural racism in schools to improve student experience and outcomes, particularly for students of color. After careful deliberation, the Ad Hoc Committee recommends that the coalition focus its efforts on disproportionate discipline of students of color, school policing, school curriculum, and hiring and training of school personnel. The Ad Hoc Committee believes there are opportunities for meaningful and impactful changes in each of these areas.

As it is throughout society, racism is interwoven into every aspect of our educational system. It is our respective organizations' responsibility to advance reforms in the identified areas in order to advance the cause of racial equity. These reforms will improve student outcomes by boosting attendance, facilitating positive school culture, and increasing engagement, all of which will contribute to improved academic performance.

Disproportionate Discipline of Black and Latinx Students

Punitive discipline and zero-tolerance policies have resulted in alarmingly disproportionate discipline rates of Black and Latinx students compared to the rest of the student population. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, during the 2015-16 school year, Black students accounted for 17% of student suspensions in California despite making up only 5% of the student population.

Zero tolerance policies reinforce racism through harsh punishments, which increase dropout rates and feed the school-to-prison pipeline. Restorative justice, however, is found to reduce suspensions and expulsions while improving academic outcomes and decreasing violence. By focusing on accountability and repairing harm, school-based restorative justice fosters a sense of community and cultivates a climate where destructive responses to conflict are less likely to occur.

Schools need to invest more resources into programs that support student development and learning such as mental health supports, social emotional learning, restorative justice, and needed health and social services. Schools also need to collect and report to the Department of Education comprehensive data related to disciplinary interactions between students and any school staff member and or police. This data must be disaggregated by student demographics and be made publicly available.

School Policing

In order to ensure that schools are a place where students are comfortable and ready to learn, there must be a statewide clarification of the role of school police and additional training to ensure officers are prepared to work with TK-12 students and improve the safety and educational experience in schools, particularly for Black and Latinx students.

Districts need to clarify and enforce the appropriate role of school police officers. Too often, educators call upon law enforcement and school police to respond to matters that fall outside the scope of police responsibility. School police should be responsible for enforcing penal code, not for enforcing student disciplinary matters, which are the responsibility of school administrators. Contract language should explicitly outline, and staff training should reflect the role of school police, including specifying matters that are to be handled by other personnel.

There is a significant disparity in the number of hours some police officers receive in training specific to working in K-12 school settings versus others. A police officer who works for a municipality and is assigned to a school campus might have no training specific to working with students while there is a legislative mandate that police officers hired directly by LEAs receive 40 hours of training specific to schools-based police work. A minimum standard for initial and ongoing training must be required for all school-based police officers. The training should include childhood development, mental health, de-escalation techniques, history of school policing, restorative justice, and the unique lived experiences of the diverse populations within their school community.

School Curriculum

School curriculum is predominantly written from the frame of reference of a dominant group or viewpoint. This formulation excludes, misrepresents, or presents communities of color as less than or as “the other.” A racist curriculum furthers the status quo in which the dominant group retains its power and privilege. Overt and covert forms of racism in school curriculum are internalized and normalized and can have lifelong impacts on students.

School curriculum must empower students to identify and challenge racism. It must acknowledge the racist past of the state and country and the forms of oppression that persist today. The state should implement an anti-racist curriculum that focuses on the intersectionality of race and gender and challenges existing colonialist perspectives.

Hiring and Training of School Personnel

Research from the Learning Policy Institute suggests that when hiring practices mirror the ethnic and racial diversity of the student population, student academic performance improves. Teachers of color help close achievement gaps. Where recruitment barriers exist and even in places where they do not, implicit bias and cultural competency training can help school personnel value the perspectives of students of color and approach misbehavior as learning opportunities rather than taking disciplinary action.

School administrators must make intentional efforts to hire personnel who reflect the population of the communities they serve. All school personnel should receive implicit bias and cultural competency training. Educators should engage in culturally responsive classroom management and use restorative practices.

Conclusion

Schools need to invest in restorative justice practices and other alternatives to discipline strategies and collect data regarding disciplinary action against students based on their demographics. The role of police officers on K-12 school campus needs to be refined and clarified. School police officers must receive ongoing training specific to the K-12 setting from professionals with the right competencies. School curriculum must acknowledge racism and empower students to confront racial injustices. The hiring and training of school personnel should be guided by the communities they serve and include implicit bias training. We are confident that our recommendations, as a collective, will improve school climate and safety on school campuses for students of color, which will ultimately result in improved academic performance and success.