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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Why School Board Diversity Matters

By Christina A Samuels

The racial and ethnic makeup of school boards rarely matches that of the students in the schools they are responsible for. Yet a growing body of research suggests having more diverse school boards can make concrete differences in how schools operate.

Some studies suggest, in fact, that having just one minority member on a board increases a school district's financial investment in high-minority schools, and even some measures of student achievement and student climate.

But at a time when the student population is growing more diverse, most school boards across the country don't meet even that low bar, according to a survey by the EdWeek Research Center. And most school board members, when asked in the survey, said that the lack of minority representatives on their own boards was no more than a minor problem.

Creating a Pipeline

Both superintendents and board members have a role to play in elevating different voices, say school board members. District leaders can't pick candidates, but they can create "leadership academies" to teach interested community members about the workings of their school systems. They can also create committees and other advisory boards that allow parents an entry point into getting more involved in their school district, if they choose.

Armando Rodriguez, a member of the Canutillo, Texas, school board, said a "good solid leadership program" run by the district for parents, educators, and students could also drive accountability and transparency about how the system operates. And the effort must go beyond simple ethnic matching, he said.

Canutillo ISD, a district of about 6,000 students in El Paso County, is more than 90 percent Hispanic and is served by a predominantly Hispanic board. But school board members have tended to come from the developed neighborhoods in the community, leaving more rural areas unrepresented, he said. Moving to single-member districts, instead of the at-large representation Canutillo has now, could help, Rodriguez said.

"The excuse that there's not enough people
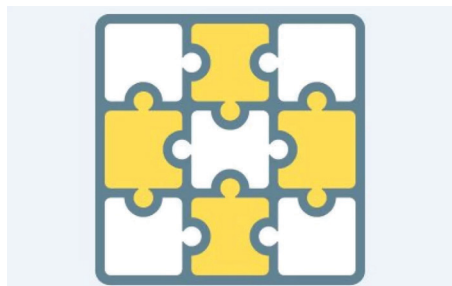
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"

We feel we have the right and the duty to criticize and question our leadership on the issues of diversity."

BEN HODGE
Central high school theater teacher

to represent [all] areas is a sad excuse," said Rodriguez, the chairman of the National Hispanic Council of School Board Members, an advisory group to the National School Boards Association. But "you've got to push some people to do it. A lot of people don't run for the board until something triggers them," he said.

Canutillo ISD, with its large population of Hispanic students, is at the forefront of a national trend. Six years ago, America's public schools hit a milestone: For the first time, more than 50 percent of students enrolled were Hispanic, Black or Asian. The shift was driven both by an increase in the number of Latino students and a decline in the numbers of non-Hispanic white students. The Asian student population is also rising; the Black student population has remained relatively steady over the past 20 years.

While the student population has seen major changes over the past few decades, school boards have remained overwhelmingly white. The EdWeek Research Center's survey of school board members found that 86 percent of respondents said they had no Latino colleagues on their board and 81 percent said they had no Black colleagues. Of the respondents who indicated that their board makeup

doesn't fully reflect student demographics, only 15 percent of respondents considered it a "major problem;" the rest considered the issue a minor problem, or no problem at all.

Fanning Controversy

But recent controversies suggest that even if most board members don't see a problem, some communities feel resentful of the lack of representation.

Early 2020, a community dispute flared when the board of the Central York, Pa., district voted to table proposed changes to its social studies curriculum, rather than add additional resources that drew from the 1619 Project, a Pulitzer Prize-winning project from the New York Times. The project aims to trace the impact of slavery on the country's founding through the present day and has drawn sharp criticism from conservatives and some historians.

Two board members objected to what they said was a focus on white privilege and racism. The school board's members are all white. The 5,000-student district's population is about 66 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 9 percent black and 4 percent Asian. The board's decision drew heated public comments and a rally in protest of the board's decision to table any curriculum changes.

Ben Hodge, a Central high school theater teacher who helped organize the rally, told the York Dispatch that while the community loves the district, "we feel we have the right and the duty to criticize and question our leadership on the issues of diversity."

Another example: Thornton Fractional School District, a high school district of around 3,400 students in suburban Chicago, is more than 90 percent Black and Hispanic; the school board is nearly all white. This year, a community coalition fought for a ballot measure that would require board members be elected from each of the communities served by the district, rather than being elected at large under current policy. The board said the idea needed more study and didn't place it on the November ballot.

Fewer Suspensions, Funding Shifts

The value of developing school boards that look like the rapidly diversifying communities they represent goes beyond public relations, however. A 2017 study that examined middle and high schools in Florida found that districts with diverse school boards have lower rates of school suspensions for all students, and that disparities in suspension rates between minority and white students are reduced overall.

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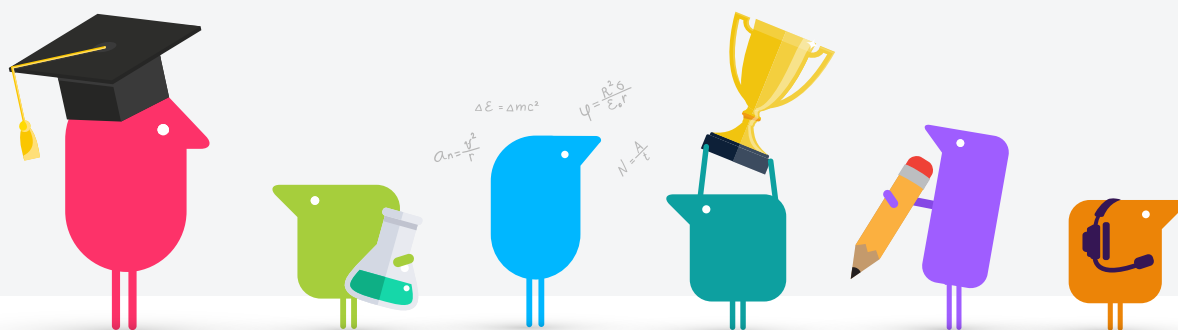
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How EdTech tools can help support DEI in your classroom

What is DEI?

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has taken center stage in education over the past few years. It's a term used to describe programs and policies that drive representation and participation of diverse groups of people. But what does it really mean?

Diversity recognizes and values the many ways in which people differ. This includes gender, race, ethnicity, abilities and disabilities, religion, culture, age, sexual orientation and people with different backgrounds and experiences.

Equity recognizes that people may need to be treated differently in order to have an equal experience. For example, some students may benefit from extra support in order to access the same, equal opportunities as their peers.

Inclusion isn't just about giving everyone access to the same environment. True inclusive practice makes sure that everyone has access to the same experiences. It makes sure that everyone feels heard, valued and represented.

DEI is an especially important conversation right now. Covid-19 shone a light on the inequalities in terms of access to education that many of our communities face.

What does it mean for a learning environment to be equitable and inclusive?

For a learning environment to be equitable and inclusive, you have to design for every learner to make decisions. Everyone should have power, space and a voice.

Truly inclusive and equitable education depends on a transformation of the educational system as we know it.

We have to realize that a lot of the design work in schools right now is actually exclusionary and oppressive.

We must ask ourselves, "Are we making choices that exclude and/or segregate learners and prevent them from learning at high levels? Who is making the decisions in the learning environment, and why?"

Often, the choices made are in line with what has traditionally been acceptable. They don't take into account the diversity and learner variability of today's classrooms. They often include students from many different cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities and family structures.

Sylvia Duckworth created the idea of the Wheel of Power/Privilege. It can help us see how marginalized groups are often the ones furthest away from power and privilege.

Think about who makes the big decisions in your school or district. Think about which groups they fall into on the wheel. In order for us to design equitable and inclusive learning environments, we must consider barriers within our design. We have to be aware of where power exists. Then we can open the door to design for every identity, every skin color, every socioeconomic background, every neuro-divergent learner to make decisions for themselves.

Chris Emdin, author of Urban Science Education for the Hip-hop Generation, says that,

> **equity is really hearing someone's voice about what they really need.**

How can technology help in a diverse classroom?

One way we can create more equitable learning environments is by making universally designed technology available to all learners.

While technology is not the solution to every problem, it can help learners to reach their full potential. It gives them the opportunity to engage in multiple ways, to identify tools that help them understand and be understood.

Techquity is the intentional & strategic use of technology to help mitigate or close the barriers that DEI initiatives are addressing, such as:

- Educational preparedness
- Disrupted learning
- Closing the achievement gap
- Digital literacy
- Suspensions and referrals
- Recruitment to gifted and AP programs

Techquity is about honor. Honor means that we empower learners, it means giving them choices and power. It's about letting the learner show up in a way that is meaningful, comfortable and impactful to them.

To get the most out of technology, we have to think about what barriers learners are facing, and how technology can help remove these barriers in a proactive way.

For example, think of how you would personally start a writing task. Do you need a desk or not? Do you like a soft chair or hard chair? Background noise or silence? What conditions do you need to do really great work?

Learners are most successful when they get to choose their conditions. We must give learners the power and the privilege to say, "This is how I want to learn it. This is how I'm going to share what I know. These are the materials that I'm going to use so that I can show you that I'm capable."

Equity is giving learners the conditions they need to be successful.

We then have to make sure that there's a pathway to give them that. An inclusive, equitable learning environment should be rich in resources, strategies and tools that help students to make choices, engage with, and find meaning in a diverse curriculum.

When you have these things in place, you can proactively design learning environments that honor all learners, help them find their voice, and discover their power.

How can we make learning more personal?

When you're thinking about creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive learning environment, you need to ensure that your students see themselves represented in the curriculum and the materials that you use with them.

We need to think about bringing in diverse stories. Stories of people who are Black, who are Brown, who are female, who are male, who are non-binary, who are children, who are of all different kinds of ability.

> **When our learners see themselves reflected in our curriculum and learning environments, it says to them, 'I see you. You belong here. You have a place in math, science, literature — in all learning spaces and all learning opportunities. You belong here.'**

Increasing diversity, equity and inclusion gives students the opportunity to visualize a successful future for themselves. It also exposes them to different ideas, perspectives and information.

Once you have put together a diverse curriculum, it's important to make sure students have the right tools to engage with it. Equitable access means all students should receive access to assistive technology resources.

Technology can help us bridge the achievement gap and digital divide, while making learning relevant for all students. Regardless of their background.

How do we design a classroom where everyone has the conditions they need?

Not every learner expresses their needs in the same way. Many students simply won't ask for help if they come across a barrier. Unfortunately, many learners will believe that they are the problem. They won't realize that the curriculum, the teaching or the resources could be the problem.

It's important to recognize that a student's behavior can show us that something needs to change. Quite often, a learner's behavior is communication about barriers. Their behavior could be saying they find the work too easy or too hard. They could be saying they would like to work together or work alone. They could be saying they need to work in a different space. The way they express their needs will also vary depending on the task, environment, sense of belonging and learner affect.

A learner's struggle gives us feedback about the design of the learning opportunity or environment. We need to ask ourselves if the learning is set up for only certain people to be successful. We need to look at our design to find out how we can give learners more choices to remove barriers.

Success is also communication. We have to ask ourselves questions like,

> Who are the students who are successful in our classrooms and in our schools?

> Who are the students who were in honors or AP classes?

> Who is welcomed in the general education classes?

> Who is getting awards? Who is being elevated and celebrated?

The answers to these questions help us find out who our learning environment is set up for. These conversations can be hard, but it helps to lift up what's really at stake.

If any student feels like they don't belong in a learning environment, then we have to change the design. Every learner has to have access to what they need, and the support that they need.

What if I am not the right person to get involved with DEI?

DEI work must make its way through multiple levels in order to address these issues in a systemic way. That includes district level, building level, and classroom level. It can be easy to feel like you're not the right person for this work. It can be easy to think that you can't make a big enough difference.

When it comes to DEI, there is no work that is too small.

Andratesha Fritzgerald, author of Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success, sums it up perfectly. She said,

> **Every human has a role to play in equity and inclusion. There is no difference that is too small, or a challenge that is too minor. There is always more work to do. One step today makes a more inclusive and equitable tomorrow for someone else.**

We may experience discomfort, and we may leave with more questions than we do answers, but that's okay. This work is about a journey, not a destination.

Thank you to Andratesha Fritzgerald, Katie Novak and Mirko Chardin for contributing their insight to this article.

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The study was led by Cresean Hughes, an assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware.

An examination of North Carolina districts in 2018 found that adding Democrats to a school board reduces Black racial segregation across schools by shifting attendance zones. The study focused on the partisanship of school board members, not their race. However, co-author Hugh Macartney, an assistant professor of economics at Duke University, said the data also offered suggestive evidence that a Democratic win increases the share of black members on a school board.

In 2020, two other research papers examined the impact of adding ethnic diversity to school boards in California. While the researchers used different methodologies, their conclusions were similar: School districts with at least one Hispanic member were more likely to make greater financial investments in district schools, and minority students saw academic gains in the years following such a change. The studies also found some changes in staffing; one noted that adding a minority school board member resulted in more principals who are minorities; the other study noted a decrease in teacher churn in high-minority schools.

"I think the takeaway here is that one member seems to make a difference," said Brett Fischer, a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia and the author of one of the California studies. "Diversity of viewpoints on the board matters and listening to the board matters. The role of the school board's individual members is not trivial."

But what stands in the way of getting that representation? Vladimir Kogan, an associate professor of political science at Ohio State University, was a co-author of one of the California studies. But he has also conducted research into just who elects school board members.

Looking across four states—California, Illinois, Ohio, and Oklahoma—Kogan and his co-authors used a database frequently used by political campaigns that want to target their outreach. The database uses different sources to predict a voter's likely race, income, and parenting status. Based on that information, the researchers found that the majority of the people who elect school board members are likely to be white and affluent, even when the students themselves are predominantly minority. The researchers also found that a majority of voters in local elections are unlikely to have a child living at home.

And the school board voters research also found that the gap in academic performance between white and minority students tends to

Including you, how many members of your school board are:

● **White** ● **Black** ● **Hispanic**
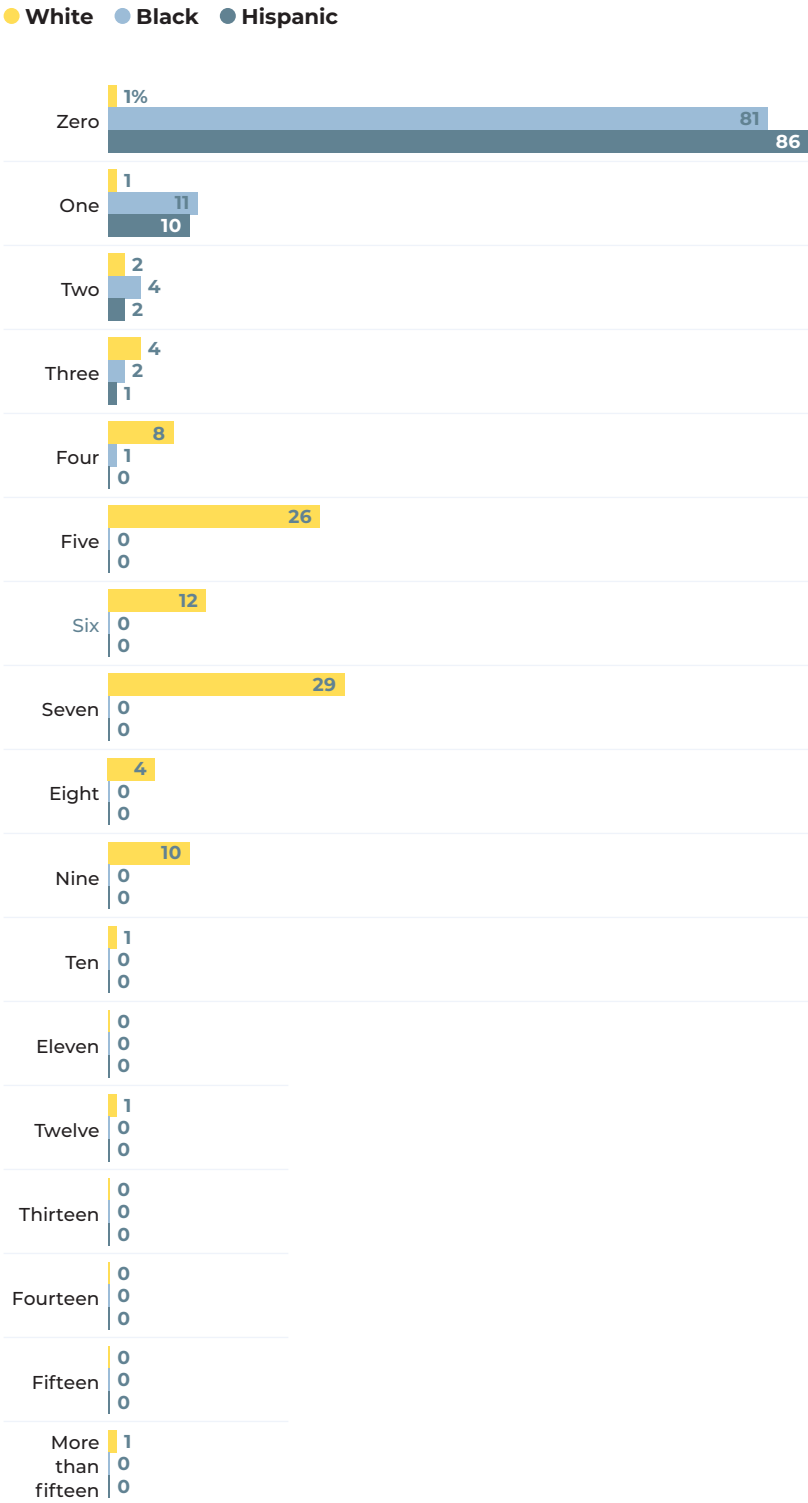
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, 2020   NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

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be largest in districts where the electorate looks most unlike the student population.

"School board members are constrained by what the voters want them to do," Kogan said. "Who's voting for them is going to be key. It defines, in some ways, the pipelines of candidates."

One way to get a larger and more diverse electorate for school board races is to move school board elections so that they coincide with higher turnout national elections, Kogan said.

Strategies From District Leaders

Devin Del Palacio, the vice president of the nearly 12,000-student Tolleson Union High School Board in suburban Phoenix, said he has found that his priorities are sometimes in conflict with an electorate whose children may be long past school age.

"When I speak of things like equity and funding and teaching pay, that's not a priority for them," said Del Palacio, the chairman of the National Black Council of School Board Members, an advisory group to the National School Boards Association. However, they do respond to the idea that good schools mean higher property values and safe neighborhoods.

What can be done to encourage a board that more closely matches its community?

"I'm actively trying to recruit people," Del Palacio said. But it can be a challenging sales job—the hours are long, pay is likely low, and members who also work full time need extremely flexible jobs to accommodate the time needed to campaign and to be out in the community, he said.

Ethan Ashley, a member of the board that oversees the 45,000-student New Orleans district, also said that pay is a barrier to getting more diverse and younger members on a school board.

"When you don't pay someone, you end with older, retired leaders who aren't necessarily fully reflective of the population they serve," said Ashley, who is Black. He is the co-founder of School Board Partners, a national organization of school board members who are focused on antiracist leadership. "It's a very important role in our community, but it's probably the least-paid role as an elected official. And it comes with an oversized impact on everything."

Atlanta, where 70 percent of the 52,000 students are Black, has a predominantly Black board. But that alone is not enough to ensure that all students are achieving to their highest

potential, said Erika Mitchell, a Black board member and a fellow with School Board Partners' leadership development program.

"You have the representation, but the achievement gap for Black students is still huge," Mitchell said. "In this city I've seen people who look like me who are not for my kids. And that is hard to accept." During her time on the board, Mitchell said she's successfully pushed for the district to implement a domestic sex trafficking protocol to increase awareness among staff and support for affected students. She's also worked to introduce trauma-informed and restorative justice practices in the schools, in hopes of reducing the numbers of Black children referred to the juvenile justice system. Those were not necessarily priorities of all her fellow board members, but that's where she saw needs, Mitchell said.

Howard Carlson, a retired superintendent and co-author of the 2008 book *So Now You're the Superintendent*, said district leaders can work to build more-representative school boards by creating programs that teach interested community members about the inner workings of the school board. Superintendents and school boards can also create advisory committees and other groups that allow interested parties to get their feet wet, before deciding to take the plunge into board service.

And diversity must also be taken a step beyond race and ethnicity. For example, school districts are grappling with growing shares of students living in concentrated poverty. Board members may not have personal experience with that struggle.

Building a pipeline takes time, Carlson said. "You have to be intentional about it, and you have to have this set of opportunities that can take people from where they are to ultimately board service."

Steve Carona, a Latino member of the Fort Wayne, Ind., school board since 1981, echoed the theme that change takes time. When he joined the board, the district leadership was battling desegregation orders. Now, the system of nearly 30,000 students has an extensive array of choice programs to promote desegregation.

"Progress is slow, and it tests the patience of many people. I admire those people who are on the cutting edge, holding positions maybe sharper than mine—you need that," Carona said. "And you need more-moderate people to keep moving forward and to allow a certain amount of people to get behind you." ■

Students Sought Changes at Their Middle School. Their Principal Listened

By Denisa R. Superville

Natalie Armstrong wore leggings all through elementary school. But she had to adjust her go-to wardrobe when she started 6th grade at Western Branch Middle School in Chesapeake, Va., because the dress code policy required girls to wear tops that fell past their buttocks if they were wearing leggings.

Cold-shoulder tops also were banned, along with shorts that ended above the knees and jeans with rips or holes. Boys couldn't wear sagging pants. And students who repeatedly violated those rules could face an in-school suspension.

"I literally had to wear a dress over my leggings," said Armstrong, 14, now a freshman at Western Branch High School, who added that she spent more time in the morning worrying about whether her clothes would get her into trouble than about what she'd learn in school that day. "I was so annoyed with it—since the day I got into 6th grade."

That's changed due to the efforts of a student-led social justice task force initiated by Principal S. Kambar Khoshaba that has prompted action on issues from the dress code to the concerns of LGBTQ students and inclusion of students of color in honors classes.

"If you listen to kids, they'll give you a different perspective," said Khoshaba, who invited students last year to share what they'd like to change at school. "They are the primary clients."

In addition to dress code changes, the social justice council's efforts prompted much-needed privacy additions and aesthetic upgrades to the girls' and boys' restrooms, and changes in the lunchtime seating arrangement that allowed students in some grades to eat with friends.

Efforts to foster a more-inclusive school environment include a new sensory garden for students with autism and a Gay-Straight Alliance club.

And the school is modifying how it selects students for honors classes in response to concerns that students of color were underrepresented in those classes.

A concerted effort to have students' voices heard

With the coronavirus pandemic disrupting schooling and communities for nearly 18 months and the country undergoing a wide discussion about equity, Khoshaba wanted to give students an opportunity to have their voices heard and actively shape their experience during the school year.

"I want students to feel like this is a safe place for them, that is where they've had the best time of their lives," said Khoshaba, who is in his eighth year as the school's principal. "And in order to do that, we have to talk to them, we have to listen to them. For me, it's been 30 years or so since I've been [a student]. … What was available for me back in the day and what's available to our students today are drastically different."

Khoshaba initially invited 40 students to participate in the initiative last year, 20 each from 7th and 8th grades. Because some students were still learning remotely, half of the students invited were at home.

He also opened participation to anyone else in the school, to draw beyond the students who were most often involved in school activities. Eventually, a core group of 15 students, mostly 8th graders, stayed on.

They came with lots of ideas, some of which they had been itching to get off their chests for some time.

The dress code was one burning issue. Participants also said LGBTQ students, some of whom were being bullied, needed more support. There were issues with the girls' restroom: The smell was unpleasant, there was a gap when the door closed that didn't allow for complete privacy—and they wanted full-length mirrors. The urinals in the boys' restrooms also lacked privacy barriers, and students had to keep their hands on the faucet to keep the water running while washing their hands.

While one student suggested no homework, and another Kool-Aid in the fountain, the students "were not asking for anything unreasonable," Khoshaba said.

"By and large, the things that we settled on were very serious and mature topics," he said.

A particularly meaty one was the enrollment of students of color in advanced classes. Khoshaba dug into the school's data and found that the students' perceptions were correct.

From left, Mia Arie Wilson, 13, Lindsey Coates, 13, Ava Bell, 13, and Makayla Waiters, 13, at Western Branch Middle School in Chesapeake, Va., were part of a student social justice task force that prompted big changes at their school.

—Julia Rendleman for Education Week

While about 37 percent of students at Western Branch were Black, they made up 24 percent of those enrolled in honors classes.

"Their perception was validated by the numbers," Khoshaba said.

The school uses state standardized tests, reading scores, class grades, and teacher recommendations for placement in those courses. But often, if a child is not in honors in 6th grade, even if they get all A's in their regular courses, they stayed on the regular track in subsequent grades. And some parents, who were also participating in a school-led social justice initiative for adults, told Khoshaba that they didn't know how to get their children into those classes.

After discussion, the academic team developed a profile of character traits students in those classes demonstrated, such as being self-starters, organized, motivated, and ready to take on challenges.

The team is asking teachers to recommend students who are doing well in their courses and show those traits for honors courses. The school is deemphasizing—but not removing—standardized testing as part of the honors entrance considerations. And it's also made it less intimidating to take honors, allowing students to enroll in one of two courses instead of a full slate.

The disproportionality gap for Black student placement in honors has fallen from 13 percent to 8 percent from last school year to this one, Khoshaba said.

Making the case on highly personal issues

On the dress code, the students came prepared to back up their requests. They told their principal that the dress code was unfair to girls, students of color, and poor students.

"One of the kids sent me research," Khoshaba said, "which was humorous as well as amazing to me that a child would be so invested."

But it was Armstrong's statement that she spent so much time in the morning worrying about what to wear so she wouldn't earn a dress code violation—or get "dress-coded" as the students referred to it—that floored Khoshaba.

He wasn't aware of how much of a problem the code was for female students.

"That's a hard concept—to say that our

practices are discriminatory," said Khoshaba, who inherited the policy when he became principal. "It's hard because you need to be open to the idea that you may be discriminating against kids."

With half the students at home during the 2020-21 school year, Khoshaba used the opportunity to try out the new dress code—girls can wear shorts up to the mid-thigh, and cold-shoulder tops are now permitted, for example. The school has dialed down the punishment, opting to have an in-person suspension served during lunch time for repeat violations.

"I was really excited, and I know a lot of students were excited that they could wear the clothes they wanted and they were comfortable in school," Armstrong said. "They were happy about it. It makes me feel better about making that change."

Grace Bowers, who thought the dress code was unfair to female students, said the changes have been a relief.

"I am very proud of what we did," said Bowers, now a high school freshman. "It was really a positive change for me and for students in the middle school now ... I don't think they are as anxious to think they are going to get 'dress-coded,' or what other people will think about what they are wearing. It relieves so much tension."

Restrooms were updated with new faucets and black strips were added to ensure privacy in the girls' bathroom. Misting sprays were purchased to deal with the odor, and partitions were installed so that boys could have some privacy in the restroom. And full-length mirrors were added to the girls' bathrooms.

The students give their principal credit for facilitating the changes.

"He's always been on top of stuff, and he's always been good about actually listening to us and getting it done, so I did expect it to be fixed," said Ava Bell, 13, who was part of the group that discussed the girls' bathroom issue with Khoshaba over the summer.

"I was just very surprised at how soon he got it done, because it was done before school started."

Bell is more empowered to approach the principal if she sees things that need to be addressed.

A learning process continues

The honors program remains a work in progress, and there were questions about whether the quality of the program would be diluted. The only issue that was somewhat

controversial was the proposal to start a Gay-Straight Alliance club, Khoshaba said.

"Everybody who I've talked to wants to support children," Khoshaba said. "This was just a concern [about] why are we doing this and why are we doing it now. I explained to people I spoke with that this is what students are asking for, and if students are asking for something, if it's reasonable and we can do it, we're going to do it because this is a student-centered school."

It was a powerful learning process for the students, he said.

"The kids saw that they said something, and it changed the experience at school," Khoshaba said. "Your voice can be very powerful in

—Julia Rendleman for Education Week

Kambar Khoshaba has been principal at Western Branch Middle School in Chesapeake, Va., for eight years and cites big strides in "letting kids express themselves in a socially acceptable way."

shaping the world. ... Look at what you're doing to shape the [school's] culture, not just for this year's kids, but for future generations."

Bowers said it was a fun experience participating in the committee, and she will likely continue to speak up about things she cares about.

"It made me feel very confident that I actually had a voice, that I could say what I wanted, and that my opinion was valid," Bowers said.

Lindsey Coates, 13, a member of the cheer

team, yearbook, and the Student Council Association, said the process made her comfortable bringing her concerns to the principal's attention.

"It just made me feel really seen and appreciated, " Coates said. "Our school really listened to us ... I feel comfortable bringing ideas to light."

Amy Daniel, who teaches 8th grade U.S. History and serves as director of student activities, the SCA advisor, and PTA liaison, wasn't surprised by the topics the students asked Khoshaba to address, but she was struck by the level of detail and the rationale underpinning those requests.

"Sometimes it makes a difference when it comes from kids, sometimes it can be so moving—it's like that lightbulb goes off," Daniel said.

Students, she said, felt they'd been listened to by their principal.

"I feel like what you're doing is you're modeling the proper way for leadership," Daniel said. "He's letting kids know [how] to make positive decisions, and he's showing that part of being a good leader is listening and taking action."

Makayla Waiters, 13, who is involved in the Student Council Association and orchestra, quickly accepted Khoshaba's invitation to join the social justice initiative last year. A key point for her was celebrating students' heritage and promoting unity and an inclusive school community, where students of all backgrounds and sexualities felt comfortable.

"It's definitely an accomplishment that I won't forget—ever," she said of the changes made so far because of the students' involvement.

Adults, she said, should take students' concerns seriously. "They should definitely treat them like people, and not just kids taking tests and getting good grades—just treat them as people, as equals." she said. "Make them feel like they have a voice, ... but also [guide] them to help them make the right decisions."

Mia Arie Wilson, 13, who participates in the Student Council Association and cheerleading, was also part of the "Be You, for You" campaign to promote schoolwide inclusivity.

"It's symbolically letting kids know everyone has the right to feel comfortable in their own person," she said. "It's a reminder to be kind, to be accepting of people."

The improvements have led to a more peaceful schooling environment.

"It's just really peaceful. You can wake up in the morning and just know that you're going to have a peaceful day here, and I really like that." ■

—iStock/Getty

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'Nation's Report Card' Has a New Reading Framework, After A Drawn-Out Battle Over Equity

By Sarah Schwartz

The governing board that oversees the test known as the "nation's report card" has adopted a new framework for designing the reading assessment, one that will provide more granular information about student performance by socioeconomic status and race and test students' ability to read across disciplinary contexts.

But even after a unanimous vote to approve the new framework, some members of the panel tapped to develop the document have lamented what they see as missed opportunities for a fairer test—the after-effect of a heated back-and-forth over equity in assessment during the development process.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the NAEP, is given to a nationally representative sample of U.S. students to measure what they know and can do across subjects.

The National Assessment Governing Board supervises the NAEP, and leads the process for updating the frameworks that guide how the test is constructed. The reading framework was last revised in 2009. The changes will go into effect for the 2026 test administration.

A key consideration in updating the framework is maintaining NAEP's long-term trend line, the ability to compare results from upcoming years to past scores, so as to draw conclusions about whether students are improving or not. (The National Center for Education Statistics, which conducts and analyzes NAEP tests, has said that the new adopted framework is likely to maintain trend.)

Understanding what the trends are is especially important now, said Lesley Muldoon, the NAGB's executive director, to evaluate the effect that COVID-19 has had on student achievement "so that people can have a trusted baseline that they can use going forward."

The framework development process has always included a diversity of perspectives, with varying factions working to hammer out their differences to develop a consensus document. But tensions ran especially high this time.

The debate raised questions central to the construct of reading itself: What does "real-world reading" actually look like?

And how much of it is influenced by readers' cultural backgrounds and the social contexts in which they learn?

At the same time, these conversations were taking place in the middle of a national conversation on race that has pushed educational organizations to consider how teaching, learning, and assessment can better support students of color.

Framework offers more data on students' reading across disciplines

There are significant changes in the consensus document—changes that advocates on both sides of the framework debate said, in interviews with Education Week, would make NAEP a richer source of data on students' reading ability.

The new framework calls for more detailed reporting on NAEP subgroups. Scores won't just be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and English-language learner status, but also differentiated by socioeconomic status within race and ethnicity. So, going forward, it would be possible to see the differences in scores between Black students from high-income families and Black students from low-income families, for example.

Students will also be tested on their ability to read informational text in social studies and science. This isn't meant to evaluate students' content knowledge—"this is not a test about whether they know the causes of the American Revolution," Muldoon said—but rather that students can use discipline-specific reading skills in genres they'll encounter in the classroom and real world.

And the framework adds a new "comprehension target," or tested component of reading comprehension ability. Previously, the framework included three: 1) locate and recall information, 2) integrate and interpret information, and 3) analyze and evaluate information.

Now, students will also be expected to "use and apply" what they read, to solve problems or create something new. For example, after reading a series of opinion pieces on a subject, a student might be asked to write a blog that synthesizes the different positions or offers their own argument.

"This is not just your mother's and father's 'find the main idea,'" said David Steiner, a professor of education at Johns Hopkins University and the executive director of its Institute for Education Policy. (Steiner was not involved in the drafting of the framework, but has commented publicly on the process.)

Other updates to the framework formalize changes that have already been made to the NAEP, following its shift to digital, rather than paper, administration. These include updates such as incorporating more digitally native text—such as what might be read on websites—and virtual "characters" that simulate a classroom environment or group work.

One new feature added to this list: Test-takers will also have examples of student responses to questions, to better illustrate what a strong response looks like.

'What kind of reading do we want to draw inferences about?'

At a board meeting, held both in person in McLean, Va., and streamed online, members praised the consensus process that resulted in the framework adoption.

Still, some members of the development panel felt that the final version diverged too far from the initial drafts—and that commitments made to equity were stripped at the 11th hour by a vocal minority of NAGB's main board.

At the heart of this disagreement were two interconnected questions: How to define reading comprehension and what constitutes "real-world" reading.

Early versions of the framework, written by the NAGB-appointed development board, put forth a sociocultural model of reading comprehension. The model argues that reading is in part about what's going on inside a student's head—the cognitive processes—but that comprehension is greatly influenced by social and cultural contexts like home, school, and community.

These early drafts also broadened the use of "informational universal design elements," text introductions, pop-ups, and videos that give students some background knowledge about the passages that they are about to read. This change was suggested because research has shown that reading comprehension ability is greatly influenced by readers' background knowledge on the topic. (Students will probably have an easier time reading Animal Farm, for example, if they have some understanding of the Russian Revolution.)

Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of literacy at the University of Michigan School of Education, and a member of the framework development panel, said that beefing up these knowledge scaffolds would have made NAEP a truer test of students' reading comprehension ability. It would test their knowledge of text structures, or their skills in analyzing

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> The goal ... is to handle background knowledge in ways that strengthen the validity of the assessment, rather than trying to define it out of existence as a factor in reading comprehension."
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> **GROVER (RUSS) WHITEHURST**
> NAGB board member and former director of the Institue of Education Sciences

information, rather than their content knowledge, she said. It would level the playing field for students who come to the test with different stores of knowledge.

When this version of the framework was put out for public comment, though, it brought forth harsh criticism from some corners of the education world. "This came to be seen as an attempt to inflate the scores of traditionally underperforming students," Cervetti said. "And nothing could be further from the truth."

But Steiner, who criticized the draft framework when it was released for comment, said that providing all that supporting information would have created conditions on the NAEP that don't exist in real-world reading. Take a word like yacht, he said. "You could argue, and this is argued in many state assessments, you can't use a word like yacht, because less-affluent students have not grown up in a world of yachts."

But "yacht," Steiner said, is a word that regularly shows up in works that students might be expected to read as adults: news, magazines, novels. It's part of a broad public

vocabulary that students would be expected to know, and that teachers could reasonably be expected to make sure students know, he said.

Testing whether students are prepared for reading in college and career should include testing whether they can read and make sense of texts that include that word, he argued—and not testing this could mask indicators that students might have trouble with reading later on.

The draft framework was released for public comment last summer, and the development panel incorporated changes resulting from that feedback. But in May, when the revised framework was presented to the full board, some members thought the changes didn't go far enough.

Grover (Russ) Whitehurst, a NAGB board member and former director of the Institue of Education Sciences, conducted his own, further revision of the document, striking most of the references to sociocultural frameworks and toning down the use of informational UDEs, to the alarm of many members of the original development panel.

"The goal … is to handle background knowledge in ways that strengthen the validity of the assessment, rather than trying to define it out of existence as a factor in reading comprehension," Whitehurst wrote at the time.

To hammer out these differences and create a consensus document, NAGB's chair, Haley Barbour, assembled a smaller, cross-committee working group which put forth the final framework as adopted.

Informational UDEs are still in the framework, but they play a much smaller role. This concerns Cervetti, who maintains that a more robust set of informational UDEs would make the NAEP more like "real" reading, not less.

"In the real world, outside of a standardized assessment, we rarely read completely unfamiliar texts in isolation," she said. If a student reads a word they didn't know, they can look it up. "We all have phones, and computers, and people [around us], and dictionaries," Cervetti said.

"What constitutes real reading is, I think, a real bone of contention. And it makes a huge difference," said P. David Pearson, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, and the chair of NAGB's development panel. "But the question is, what kind of reading do we want to draw inferences about?"

Possible changes to framework development process on the horizon

Pearson said the final framework is "something to be celebrated," but also that he would want to see more work done—in defining reading in more of a sociocultural context, which he said would bring NAEP in line with other national and international assessments, and in gathering more data about students' school and community environments. And he questioned the framework development process, which requires that NAGB approve new developments through consensus.

"I think that's a great tradition, but if things get controversial, and if there are ideological and theoretical differences, then I'm not convinced that consensus is the only way to make important decisions," he said. "The other thing about consensus is that it's another name for minority rule, just as the filibuster in the Senate is another name for blocking the majority."

The majority of the framework development committee supported the version of the document put forth in earlier drafts, Pearson said, and changes were introduced by a small group of dissenters in the full NAGB board.

But Whitehurst, one of these dissenters, said that his does not represent a minority view. He argued that many in the reading education community—including researchers and school-level educators alike—would endorse a model of reading that put more emphasis on the cognitive processes than sociocultural contexts. But, he said, this diversity of viewpoints wasn't included on the framework development panel.

"Those of us on the board who sort of had to take that position would not have had to if there were greater diversity in the views of those who developed the document," he said.

After a drawn-out public battle over the reading framework, the framework development process itself is up for review September 2021 by the NAGB board—in part, so the team can "have an easier time with framework development in the future," said Sharyn Rosenberg, NAGB's assistant director for assessment development, in the board meeting.

Ideally, Whitehurst said, the framework development process going forward would produce documents in which "the tensions are already worked out." ■

Danielle Myers leads her 4th grade class in a mindfulness exercise at the Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pa., last December.

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Pandemic, Racial Justice Fuel Surge In Demand for Social-Emotional Learning

By Arianna Prothero

The pandemic and rising concerns about racial justice over the past year and a half have fueled a surge in school district interest in and spending on social-emotional learning, according to a new report.

District spending on SEL programming grew about 45 percent between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, from $530 million to $765 million. That increase coincided with a dramatic shift among teachers' and school and district administrators' priorities away from academic achievement and testing and toward students' mental health, the report says.

But the report—written by the consulting firm Tyton Partners and published in collaboration with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional learning, or CASEL—warns that in schools' rush to expand social-emotional learning, little consensus has evolved about what quality programs should look like.

The report draws its conclusions from a survey of more than 100 SEL providers and a survey of over 2,000 teachers and school and district administrators.

When asked in the survey to rank their top priorities prior to COVID-19 versus during the pandemic, improving students' mental health and promoting students' social-emotional com-

petence rose to the number 1 and 2 priorities listed by administrators and teachers. Improving school diversity, equity, and inclusion was listed as the 3rd highest priority, up from number 8.

Prior to the pandemic, administrators and teachers said their top priorities were improving student performance on standardized tests, and increasing the number of college-ready and career-ready graduates.

A majority of survey respondents cited the pandemic and a greater focus on racial injustice as driving the rise in interest in social and emotional learning in their schools. Among school and district leader respondents, around three quarters said they either slightly agreed or strongly agreed that COVID-19 had accelerated interest in SEL in their school or district. About 65 percent of respondents said the same of racial injustice and the need for racial equity.

That rising interest has been even more pronounced for the middle and high school grades, the survey found. Schools are investing much more in SEL curriculum, program implementation, professional development for staff, measurement, and technical assistance in secondary schools, compared with before the pandemic.

"As schools and districts expand their grade 6-12 implementation, and providers follow suit with their offerings, it will be important for the field to evolve best practices to best meet the needs of older students," write the report's authors.

Can the SEL marketplace rise to meet the growing demand?

Quality in the SEL marketplace may not keep pace with demand, the report warns. And while awareness of SEL is high, administrators and teachers are not as familiar with popular SEL standards and frameworks.

"[In] the push to rapidly address these important issues, it is tempting for schools and districts to unintentionally implement half-measures, or low-quality measures, that are masquerading as high quality ones (whether intentionally or unintentionally)," the report's authors write.

There are many different social-emotional learning frameworks for standardizing what SEL should look like when implemented in a school. Among the most popular are CASEL's core SEL competencies, the Emotional Intelligence model, and 21st Century Skills.

Among the survey respondents, 90 percent were broadly aware of what SEL is, but only 40 percent of school respondents and 60 percent of district respondents were aware of the most popular SEL frameworks.

There are a surprisingly large number of different frameworks considering the SEL marketplace is a mature one, say the report's authors. Furthermore, the field does not seem to have coalesced around a common concept of what quality SEL looks like.

Quality control issues are common with fast-growing markets, the report says, in part because growth beckons low-quality providers to enter. And when high-quality providers cannot meet fast-growing demand, low-quality providers fill in the gap.

In the report's survey of SEL suppliers, only 37 percent of those surveyed have conducted third-party quantitative studies of the effectiveness of their programs or products with a comparison group.

Looking ahead, the report flagged additional issues around managing the demand for social-emotional learning programs.

Schools and districts are relying too heavily on federal funds that will run out to pay for their social-emotional offerings. Federal relief dollars were tied for the second most-used funding source to support SEL in districts along with Title I money and projected to be the top funding stream.

SEL providers, meanwhile, need more sustainable funding models as they currently are too reliant on philanthropic dollars over program service fees, the report notes. ■

Published July 12, 2021

What Employers Can Teach Schools About Neurodiversity

By Sarah D. Sparks

Thinking differently can be an edge in the work world. Someone with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder may have a drive for novelty that can spark entrepreneurship. And an autistic student's childhood fascination with games could launch a career in software development. Employers and researchers alike are now beginning to understand how issues that challenge students in the classroom can come with benefits for the right job.

Yet even as some of the world's biggest companies, including Microsoft and SAP, have launched hiring initiatives focused on recruiting more workers with autism, ADHD, and other categories of brain differences, experts say schools still do little to teach students how to leverage their strengths rather than

—Getty

make up for their disabilities when preparing for colleges and careers.

"You know, there's a lot of publicity about neurodiversity in the workplace, but it hasn't filtered to the special education community," said Thomas Armstrong, the executive director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, which provides teacher training on students in special education, and author of several books on neurodiversity and special education. "Special ed. is still dragging its heels from a past that is oriented around disease, deficits, and disorders."

By law, schools must use a student's strengths to guide the development of their individualized education programs for special education, and beginning at age 14, IEPs must also include goals for students in their transition to work or study after high school. But in practice, most high school guidance counselors have large caseloads and little time for the more intensive coordination with family and special education and general education teachers that may be needed for full career planning for such students, according to Chantall Lowe, senior director of community engagement for IncludeNYC, an advocacy and support group for students with disabili-

ties and their families in New York.

"I think when you do see supported employment being talked about early on for young people, you see a lot of hospitality and retail and service industry jobs," Lowe said. "It's kind of like, we have these couple of buckets, and this is what we're going to do, and there's less of, OK, this is what this young person is interested in. Can we find something that meets those needs?"

As of 2020, the most recent available federal data show, the unemployment rates for those with a disability remain higher than the rates for those without, across all ages and educational attainment levels. People with a disability were more likely to be self-employed than those without a disability.

Traditional approaches can create inequities

The problems for students in special education go beyond just limited formal programs to connect them to jobs. Studies suggest that just being labeled as having a disability can limit students' access to courses they could succeed in, and that these students need to have hope of a broader array of career options later.

"People don't understand that many of these disabilities are not based on low IQ. A lot of those kids with ADHD and kids with learning disabilities, are high IQ and [when] they're achieving below their potential is usually how those were diagnosed," said Dara Shifrer, an associate professor of sociology at Portland State University in Oregon. "But I don't think kids are told this when they're diagnosed, and so it really affects their social psyches and affects the way their teachers perceive them, the way their parents perceive them."

In one 2013 study, researchers compared the course-taking of high schoolers who had an individualized education program for a learning disability to students with no such designation, but who had closely matched 10th grade reading and math assessment scores, ages, backgrounds, academic mindsets of themselves and their close friends, and reported behavior problems in school.

They found that a student labeled with a learning disability was 19 percentage points less likely to complete college preparatory coursework than a student with similar academic placement, performance, mindset and behavior in early high school but who was not labeled with a disability. Among students of similar income levels, there were larger gaps in course-taking between students identified with learning disabilities and similar students without than there was between white

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A NEURODIVERSE WORKER LOOKS BACK

Stephen Braun, a quality assurance lead at Aspiritech, a Chicago technology firm, manages software and game design and development. One of the more than 90 percent of the firm on the autism spectrum, he said he had a hard time retaining information during lectures in school, but picks up things visually quickly.

Braun said he always wanted to go into video game design and programming, but was repeatedly shut down in high school. He had an individualized education program but, "they didn't follow it much," he recalled.

"I didn't really learn much in terms of college prep, since they didn't really think I was capable of going to college," Braun said. "In terms of my career path, I was laughed at when I spoke about my ambitions."

In senior year, Braun switched schools and got involved with PACE, a three-year postsecondary transition program for students with developmental learning needs at National Louis University. From there, he entered Tribeca Flashpoint Academy, a media arts college, where he graduated in 2014.

Today Braun has helped design and produce games in contract work, and at Aspiritech has responsibility for workers in four projects while also setting up training sessions for other analysts to learn about new features and products.

Here are Braun's suggestions on how educators can help neurodiverse students make better transitions to college and careers:

- Encourage students to focus on specific skills needed for jobs that interest them. As Braun notes, "I had a general idea of what to focus on. I just didn't really know how to. As I was gearing up for college, I began to use UDK—which is a game engine—and I started to learn c++. It was mainly through trial and error."

- Teach "basic life skills" for the work world, like budgeting and dealing with stress.

- Allow students to try something new even if they may not succeed. "If a person wants to try a new subject or something that they are interested in, have them go for it," he said. "It's better for someone to fail than to be told they are not capable of doing something."

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students and students of color.

"We found teachers have much lower expectations for the kids with learning-disability diagnoses than they do similarly achieving kids without the diagnosis, said Shifrer, the lead author of the study. "And that kind of tracks through their high school experience to change the way they see themselves and what courses are placed into.

"Maybe for the low-performing kid without the diagnosis, the teacher might attribute their low performance to laziness or home support, while for the kid with the disability they might think, oh, this kid is neurologically unable to perform. And so why intervene then?" she said. "So it can be a really vicious cycle."

In a separate study published Spring of 2021, Shifrer and her colleagues analyzed the data of more than 15,000 adolescents who entered high school in 2009 through three years after high school. They tracked students whose schools or parents reported they had been diagnosed with a learning or intellectual disability, developmental delay, autism, or attention deficits. For those with attention deficits, researchers also noted whether or not symptoms were being treated medically, as prior studies have found students with treated ADHD have better outcomes than those with untreated symptoms.

Students who had been diagnosed with disabilities were significantly less likely to enroll in

college—48 percent to 58 percent, depending on the type of disability, compared to 73 percent of students without disabilities. The researchers found that high school achievement in math and science classes was a better predictor of whether a student with disabilities enrolled in college after high school than the student's attitude toward sciences, but once in college, a student's attitude toward science was a more important predictor of whether he or she actually chose a science, engineering, technology, or math major. In fact, undergraduate students with autism or medicated ADHD were more likely to choose a STEM field than students who had no cognitive disabilities.

"Promoting the participation of women, underrepresented racial minorities, and others are seen as cases of equity, but the under-representation of people with cognitive disabilities, that's seen as normal and inevitable, because there's this notion that they don't belong in the STEM world," Shifrer said. "It's so ingrained in us that these people lack potential that it's rarely raised as an equity concern and a socially rooted problem."

This employer turns autism into a strength

Helping students plan their careers based on their strengths doesn't mean ignoring their challenges, but helping them learn to manage them and advocate for support from employers, Lowe said.

"It's taking people with a certain challenge and putting them in a job where they are highlighting their talents and supporting their weaknesses—whereas most disability employment models put people in jobs that tend to highlight their weaknesses," said Brad Cohen, the chief marketing officer at Aspiratech, a Chicago-area technology firm that contracts workers with autism. "People that are on the autism spectrum tend to have a great focus, attention to detail. Often they have the ability to do a highly focused, repetitive task without losing concentration when someone else might be jumping out the window—and those talents are precisely what software testing is."

Ninety percent of the company's 130 employees have some degree of autism, and the company keeps five specialists and a dozen job coaches on staff to help employees manage work challenges—procuring headphones to help block out noisy office spaces or helping those who are uncomfortable with social speaking find new ways to keep their managers updated on projects.

The firm hires workers through interviews and aptitude tests, and provides training and job shadowing for those it hires. The company has a wait list for applicants, mainly developed through word of mouth from parents and autism advocacy groups. But Cohen said there is a "disconnect" in the skills and guidance schools give to students in college and career planning and the broader skills for career matching and self-advocacy in the workplace that neurodiverse students need.

Cohen suggested that when planning broader college and career initiatives with local businesses, school and district administrators should actively look for companies interested in hiring neurodiverse workers and find out what other specific skills they need. Organizing cohorts of neurodiverse students for internships—potentially with faculty support—can be better for introducing students and employees than simply helping a student find a solo opportunity interning or job shadowing at a workplace in which he or she would be the only neurodiverse person in the office.

"Success in life has to do with being in a job that makes the most of your strengths and minimizes the difficulties," Armstrong said. "And unfortunately, we're not making that connection for kids or helping them make that connection. And so they end up a student with an ADHD diagnosis in a 9-to-5 desk job where the stress level is going up over the top, and they interpret their stress as just another symptom of ADHD—when in fact, they ought to be a forest ranger or a fire fighter, or an emergency room physician, something with lots of thrills instead of sitting in a cubicle farm somewhere."

In fact, some studies have found disproportionate numbers of chief executive officers and entrepreneurs with ADHD, with a greater tolerance for risk and experimentation.

"Their intensive focus and honed expertise influence the distribution between positive and negative outcomes," found a team of researchers led by Johan Wiklund of Syracuse University. "It thus seems that the impulsivity to act facilitates an ongoing process of experimentation, which is taken to various ends through passion, time commitment, and persistence. Entrepreneurs with ADHD are guided by what is rather than what will be."

The bottom line, said Armstrong of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development is that "we need to go beyond the labels and go to specific skills and interests of the child" in both the workplace and in school. ■

You Can't Legislate Away Black and Gay Educators and Students

By Rafael Walker

This academic year, conservative states have asked students and teachers to keep their politics and their identities—but not their germs—to themselves. Many have followed Tennessee's example of attempting to block mask mandates and yet have demanded another kind of masking—an ideological muzzling that threatens untold numbers of teachers and students. I'm referring to the curricular purges sweeping conservative state legislatures, all emblematic of the current culture war. The first target of these purges was critical race theory (or, rather, strawman versions of it). You've likely read how states have proposed penalties for educators who teach CRT, with Tennessee suggesting fines as steep as $5 million. The second target is LGBTQ history, already banned in Tennessee and on the chopping block in its cousin states—from Alabama to Arizona.

How must it feel, as a teacher or student, to walk into a classroom five days a week knowing that your identity is a subject so taboo that the state has banned all reference to it, placing million-dollar bounties on the head of any educator who dares to broach it in class? This sounds like the stuff of nightmare, the kind of thing conceivable only in totalitarian regimes—certainly not a scenario possible in the United States in 2021. Yet this has become the day-to-day reality in this country for thousands of students and teachers who identify as LGBTQ or Black.

This new order effectively pretends that these groups don't exist as a means to suggest that they shouldn't. And this strategy, if permitted to stand, is fail-proof. I don't mean that people will stop being Black or gay; I mean that these individuals will not exist in schools. It is needless for me to wheel out the statistics detailing what everyone, including state legislators, already knows—that both LGBTQ and

Black students are more likely to drop out of school than other students. This fact was true even before states passed such hateful legislation. It can only get worse.

I feel the sting of this unwelcome development personally from virtually every angle imaginable. I am a teacher at a public college in the nation's most diverse city, New York. Much of my research and teaching center on race, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, since I am both Black and gay, I am watching my own existence negated doubly by this legislative attack. And, before becoming a professor, I had to be a student for a very long time.

The college professor in me could not imagine talking about the works of Shakespeare or Walt Whitman without referring to same-sex desire. Or examining the internal politics of the civil rights movement or the women's movement without discussing, respectively, Bayard Rustin's or Audre Lorde's sexuality. The teacher in me could not imagine looking daily into the faces of students who have entrusted me with their educations, only to repay their trust with coldhearted omissions implying that only some of their histories matter. When I look back at my school days in Texas, I painfully recall how the whitewashed, default-straight map of human history that I received, even from Black teachers, persuaded me to associate whiteness and heterosexuality with power and value and to regard everything else as inherently inferior, irredeemable aberrations from the gold standard. But I also remember the joy I felt in college when these misconceptions were corrected, when I was immersed in the mind-blowing achievements of humans of all walks of life—gay, straight, Black, Latinx, trans. The world opened up before me, and that people like me were an integral part of that world became clear as day.

The current generation of nonwhite and LGBTQ children shouldn't have to wait until they are adults to feel at home in the world. It may appear that, short of flipping seats in state legislatures, little can be done about these discriminatory bans. But, as the recent overturning of such bans in South Carolina suggests, the courts may hold the remedy. It's time to start pressing advocacy groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, to take legal action. And one way that such organizations might approach this litigious question is through the anti-discriminatory Titles IX and VI, which, respectively, protect on the basis of sex and on the basis of race, color, and national origin in education institutions that receive federal funding.

The conflict between the restrictive policies that have been signed into law in eight states

and Title IX seems clear: There simply are important historical figures whose same-sex desires figured meaningfully in their careers (again, Shakespeare, Whitman). There are also major historical events that hinge on sexuality and had implications throughout culture, such as the Stonewall uprising and the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy to name only a few. To omit such historical figures, the relevant facts of their sexuality, or LGBTQ-centered historical events would be discriminatory since one wouldn't do the same for other figures or historical events. LGBTQ students and teachers forced into curricula that prohibit the teaching of historical personages and events related to LGBTQ life are "subjected to discrimination under [an] education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance"—precisely the treatment against which Title IX defends.

The conflict with Title VI seems almost equally clear: CRT enables us to look beyond individual actors to institutions to identify racism. CRT exposes how racism, a prejudice that nonwhite people provably endure, continues to rear its ugly head even in medicine and, yes, classrooms.

The objection most frequently adduced for banning CRT is that it is divisive. But schools are full of divisive activities—band competitions, spelling bees, sports—where, we believe, students are learning how to manage challenging emotions and good sportsmanship. If divisiveness is what those on the right worry about, I am at a loss to understand the perennial survival of debate—an activity that compels students to argue over some of the

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> The world opened up before me, and that people like me were an integral part of that world became clear as day.

nation's most contentious questions. Banning CRT from curricula on the grounds of its perceived divisiveness is hypocritical and legally inconsistent. The only thing distinguishing it from these other activities is that it deals with race. CRT is being banned on the basis of race, just what Title VI was designed to prevent.

All children deserve to see themselves reflected in what they are learning. Adults deserve workplaces that acknowledge they exist. These are very modest accommodations, and it's embarrassing that people like me are still having to ask for them. But, if asking isn't enough, it's time to fight. ■

Rafael Walker is an assistant professor of English and, by courtesy, of Black and Latino Studies at Baruch College, City University of New York. He teaches and writes on literary and social issues related to critical race theory and LGBTQ and gender studies.

OPINION

Published June 27, 2021

Adults Are Banning Classroom Topics. Perhaps They Should Allow Students to Explore Them?

By Peter DeWitt

School is supposed to be a venue where students have numerous opportunities to engage in deep learning that will prepare them for their future. That learning is supposed to foster the ability for students to engage in their own learning around topics that they care about and perhaps even want to pursue after they leave high school and enter career and technical education, higher education, or the workforce in an internship capacity.

As teachers, we need to be allowed to explore issues with students like mathematical concepts, scientific problems that need our greatest thinking, or societal problems that need to be resolved. After all, we are supposed to empower students to feel they can change the world and not enable them to feel they can't do anything to change it at all.

But everything becomes a political argument …

Unfortunately, some issues are being barred from school. What are the adults so fearful of that they need to bar issues from being taught in schools when it's those very students who can help us solve them? For example, the media and politicians seem to be consumed by critical race theory and cancel culture. The adults seem to be doing a lot of talking and making decisions about what students need to hear and learn and what is not acceptable to talk about in classrooms at all.

Those adults come from the left, the right, and in the middle.

Just for clarity, Merriam-Webster dictionary describes cancel culture as, "The practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure." Vox further explains that "Conservative politicians and pundits have increasingly embraced the argument that cancel culture, rather than being a way of speaking truth to power, has spun out of control and become a senseless form of social media mob rule."

As for critical race theory, Education Week writer Stephen Sawchuk offers an excellent explanation here. He writes,

—Shutterstock

"Critical race theory is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. The core idea is that racism is a social construct, and that it is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice but also something embedded in legal systems and policies."

It seems that critical race theory is experiencing cancel culture.

Many have accused those who are trying to bar critical race theory being taught in the classroom as racist. In an Education Week blog post titled "Resisting 'Anti-Racist' Education Is Neither Racist Nor Unreasonable," opinion blogger Rick Hess writes, "The issue, I'd argue, is that the backlash is not to this broadly-supported version of anti-racist education. Rather, the opponents are reacting to the ideas and educational practices promoted by some of anti-racism's most visible and ardent adherents—ideas at odds with the values and beliefs of most Americans."

Why Not Let Students Explore These Issues?

What the adults seem to be missing here is that critical race theory and cancel culture need not be taught by teachers as much as those concepts need to be explored by students. In-

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>
> **RICK HESS**
> Opinion Blogger

stead of educators standing at the front of the classroom teaching students about CRT and cancel culture using direct instruction, perhaps those same teachers could support students as they explore these issues, and many, many more, through project-based learning.

In fact, in that same Hess article questioning the unreasonableness of resisting anti-racist education, he writes,

"As a onetime social studies and civics teacher (who long ago taught selections from Frantz Fanon, Lao Tse, and Marx to my high schoolers, alongside the Founders and Adam Smith), I've long supported efforts to look unflinchingly at American history and society, be inclusive of new perspectives, take differences more seriously, reexamine troubling practices, and do a much better job meeting the needs of all learners."

I agree with Hess that we should encourage teachers and students to reexamine troubling practices like he was allowed to do when he was a teacher. Issues like red lining (watch Segregated By Design by Richard Rothstein), or gaining an understanding of how predominantly white schools receive 23 billion dollars more in funding, like this article by Andre Perry states. These topics do not have to be explored through direct instruction, but rather through project based learning where students are researching all sides of the issue,

because through that research students can understand how these practices began and how they can have a voice in ending them.

Buck Institute for Education explains, "Project Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects." The website goes on to explain, "Project Based Learning is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge."

Where Difficult Issues and PBL Intersect

Recently, I moderated a chat on Education Week's web show A Seat at the Table focusing on How to Develop Powerful PBL with North Carolina Global Cultures teacher Matt Cone, and two of his graduated high school students, Julien Taylor and Phoenix Tudryn. Taylor and Tudryn recently wrote this outstanding opinion essay for Education Week titled "Students: Racial Justice Demands More Than a Lawn Sign."

In a private communication, Cone says,

"Global Cultures is a class that focuses on the experiences of groups from around the world who are not the dominant group in their society. In most years, we will explore 4-6 issues. In recent years, we have studied the experiences of the Yazidi in Iraq, the Hazara in Afghanistan, the Hmong in Laos, Honduran immigrants in neighboring countries, and African Americans in the United States."

Cone goes on to say,

"Global Issues is a class that changes dramatically from year to year as we try our best to study some of the most pressing and interesting issues that are in the news. In most years, we will explore 6-8 issues that deal with conflict and/or development. Recently, we have studied the conflict in Yemen, the economic collapse of Venezuela, arguments about a universal basic income, populist movements, pandemics (before COVID-19!), and the treatment of refugees."

If you have time, please consider watching the episode of A Seat at the Table because it was a powerful conversation, and we explored what PBL is and how it can be used to teach anything from career technical concepts to critical race theory and cancel culture.

In the End

I had a more conservative family member contact me lately and ask why critical race theory needs to be taught and suggested we focus on how we are the same rather than focus on issues that divide us. The issue is that there are so many disparities in our country for Black and brown people and they *do* need to be explored so they can be resolved. In that exploration, we can begin to come together to understand what we have in common and can even look at how we can come together in more authentic ways.

One of the ways teachers and students can explore these issues is through PBL. Unfortunately, more and more states are passing legislation that bars that from happening. However, what we know is that those states don't need legislation to bar those issues from being taught. Teachers will self-select not to teach it anyway, because they lack the confidence or the support to teach those issues. Both are examples of how cancel culture and critical race theory intersect.

In their recent book, *Project Based Learning*, Ross Cooper and Erin Murphy say it best when they write, "Based on what we've experienced, countless schools prioritize what's comfortable for adults, not what's best for students. And then we take issue with students when they don't buy into what we're doing."

Thank goodness for teachers like Cone and students like Taylor and Tudryn who don't shy away or bar these conversations but instead try to gain an understanding of all sides of the issue. ∎

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach.

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