

Dismantling Systemic Racism in Education: A Policy for Equity and Excellence for All Students

PIVOT Think Tank

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Civil Rights

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Executive Summary

Systemic racism and marginalization within school systems present unacceptable barriers to the fundamental right of every child to a good education. These deeply ingrained inequities, rooted in historical injustices such as slavery and Jim Crow laws, manifest today in disparities in funding, disciplinary actions, curriculum, and academic outcomes. These systemic failures undermine education's promise of upward mobility and societal contribution, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. This policy brief advocates for a proactive, multi-faceted approach to dismantle these racial inequities. By reforming funding models, implementing culturally responsive curricula, replacing punitive disciplinary practices with restorative justice, and establishing clear frameworks for stakeholder collaboration and accountability, we can create educational environments that are fair, just, and welcoming. This comprehensive commitment is an urgent moral, ethical, and practical necessity for ensuring every student, regardless of their background, has the support and opportunity to reach their full potential, ultimately enriching society as a whole.

Context

Racial justice in an educational context refers to the proactive and ongoing process of dismantling racial inequities and creating equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students, regardless of their racial or ethnic background. It is not merely about treating individuals equally but about actively identifying and rectifying historical and contemporary injustices that have created and perpetuated disparities. This pursuit directly addresses systemic racism, which manifests as deeply ingrained policies, practices, and cultural norms embedded within institutions that, often unintentionally, perpetuate racial hierarchy and disadvantage certain racial groups. These systems operate through factors like funding allocation, curriculum design, behavioral rules, and even the implicit biases teachers and leaders might hold. For example, if a school's funding relies heavily on local property taxes, schools in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods (often with more students of color) can end up with less funding.

Marginalization in the school system specifically highlights the process by which students from particular racial or ethnic groups are pushed to the fringes, denied full participation, or subjected to unfair treatment, leading to their exclusion from mainstream educational benefits and opportunities. This can be seen when there is a lack of diverse teachers, when lessons fail to connect with students' cultures, or when subtle messages devalue non-dominant cultures. These concepts are inextricably intertwined, as systemic racism often creates the conditions for the marginalization of students of color, leading to a cycle of disadvantage that impacts their academic performance, sense of belonging, and future life trajectories. Understanding these definitions is the foundational step toward developing effective and impactful interventions.

Hence our policy is to make schools truly fair for everyone. This means actively finding, checking, and taking apart the old, deep-seated ways that racism and unfair treatment are built into school systems. By doing this, we can create learning places that are equal, just, and welcoming, so every student, no matter their race or background, gets the chance to do well, reach their full abilities, and succeed.

It is my strong belief that systemic racism and marginalization in school systems are unacceptable barriers to every child's basic right to a good education. This right, a core part of fair societies, means that every student, no matter their race or background, should have the right support and learning environments to reach their full potential. These widespread unfairnesses undermine the very promise of education as a way to improve one's life, secure better jobs, and find personal happiness. When school systems, through their setup and actions, openly or subtly disadvantage certain groups, they fail in their main purpose and contribute to perpetuating unfairness in society.

I firmly state that truly excellent education can only happen when all students, especially those who have been and still are marginalized, feel safe, valued, respected, and able to succeed in their studies and lives. Ignoring or downplaying these system-wide problems perpetuates unfair cycles, erodes trust within communities, and ultimately fails to prepare everyone for a diverse and fair future. So, actively working for racial justice in schools is not just a desirable idea; it's an urgent moral, ethical, and practical necessity for everyone involved in education – from leaders and managers to teachers, parents, and students themselves. My commitment to this idea must be firm and lead to clear, measurable actions.

The roots of systematic racism and marginalization in education go very deep into the past of many societies, especially clear in the United States. The history of slavery, which stopped enslaved African Americans from getting an education, and the later time of Jim Crow laws, directly led to schools being legally separated by race. These "separate but equal" ideas, even though they sounded fair, actually led to very unequal money, broken buildings, old textbooks, and a serious lack of resources for Black students. For example, in 1930, states like Alabama spent \$37 on each white child but only \$7 on each Black child, and in South Carolina, it was \$53 for white children compared to just \$5 for Black children.

Additionally, Jim Crow laws often meant that Black schools had significantly shorter school terms, with many Black children in rural areas attending school for only two or three months out of the year, compared to longer terms for white students. This was legally supported until the important *Brown v. Board of Education* court case in 1954. Even after schools were told to desegregate, hidden and open forms of unfair treatment continued. This included school systems that often put students of color into lower academic groups, limiting their access to harder classes and paths to higher education. Unfair standardized tests also made these problems worse, often testing cultural knowledge rather than true smarts. Plus, school lessons often didn't include histories, books, and achievements from non-European cultures, which made students of color feel like their backgrounds weren't important. These past policies and practices didn't just cause individual acts of unfairness; they systematically built the very structures and ways of thinking that still cause educational differences today, creating a lasting "educational debt" owed to groups who have been pushed aside.

Today, while overt, legally enforced segregation may be less common, school systems continue to grapple with the lingering effects of these profound historical injustices and new, often more subtle, manifestations of systemic racism. Current issues highlight that simply ending legal segregation was not enough; the underlying structures and biases remain deeply embedded. We

observe alarming disparities in disciplinary actions, with Black and Indigenous students, for example, consistently facing disproportionately higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and referrals to law enforcement for similar infractions compared to their white peers. Some studies indicate that Black students are 3.4 times more likely to be expelled than white students.

This "school-to-prison pipeline" is a direct outcome of systemic biases. There is also a significant underrepresentation of teachers of color, leading to a lack of role models and culturally affirming educational experiences for many students. On top of that, school lessons often don't connect to students' cultures or include everyone, failing to show the diverse backgrounds of students and continuing a European-focused story that can make students of color feel distant and uninterested. Lasting achievement gaps linked to race and wealth remain a serious worry.

These gaps don't mean students are lacking; they mean the system isn't giving fair chances and support. These issues are made worse by hidden biases among teachers, small everyday slights (microaggressions) that students of color experience, and unfair access to advanced classes, gifted programs, and after-school activities. These problems are not just separate incidents but signs of a bigger, system-wide problem that needs urgent and full attention. Therefore, achieving real racial justice in schools needs a careful and complete breaking down of systematic racism. This means looking again at rules, ways of doing things, and common beliefs to create truly fair and welcoming learning places for every student. This policy aims to guide our combined efforts in this vital and transforming work, making sure every child has the chance to succeed.

Policy Alternatives

Solving the complicated problems of fairness for all racial groups and deep-seated unfairness in schools needs careful thought about different ways to approach it. While we clearly need to act, the methods we choose really affect how much real, lasting change we can make.

One common way schools try to help, but often isn't enough, is through "diversity programs" that focus mainly on showing different cultures without fixing deeper power imbalances. These efforts might involve celebrating holidays from various cultures, holding multicultural events, or suggesting books by diverse authors. While these things help people learn about and appreciate different cultures, they usually don't break down the unfair rules, practices, or ways money is given out that are built into the system. These approaches tend to just add cultural differences on top, instead of truly changing the core structures that keep certain groups on the sidelines. Even with good intentions, this can accidentally push aside the harder work of sharing power and making big changes to the system that are needed for real racial justice.

Another approach often seen is to rely heavily on just training individual teachers, especially on topics like "cultural understanding" or "hidden biases." While it's very important for teachers to be aware and interact better with students, these trainings often don't lead to big changes across the whole school system if they aren't part of larger policy reforms. They put the burden on individual teachers to fix deep-seated biases within a system that itself hasn't changed. This means the main reasons for unequal funding, limited access to advanced classes, or unfair discipline continue untouched. Without a broader commitment from the school system to

overhaul its policies, such training can lead to frustration or simply look good without achieving real fairness.

A third way involves making small, separate fixes that deal with problems on the surface, instead of tackling their deep roots in the system. For example, this might mean starting just one mentoring program for students of color, or offering extra help classes, without ever looking at *why* those students weren't getting the same chances in advanced programs to begin with. While these small programs can offer some short-term help to individuals, they don't actually change the fundamental unfair structures that create these problems. This keeps us in a loop where unfairness is always being managed rather than truly removed. These seemingly helpful solutions can also use up resources that could be better spent on making full, systemic changes.

However, this policy brief suggests a much more thorough and proactive approach: a complete overhaul of the system that places racial justice at the heart of all school policies and practices. This approach understands that "separate but equal" never worked, and simply treating everyone "equally" isn't enough without also providing "equitable" support to make up for past disadvantages. Our proposed policy directly targets the embedded structures of racism, rather than just treating its symptoms, offering a lasting solution.

Policy Recommendations

To achieve true racial justice, we must commit to concrete, measurable actions:

1. **Equitable Funding Reform:** Advocate for and implement funding models that de-link school resources from local property taxes. Instead, a state-wide or federal formula should allocate resources based on student need, including factors like poverty rates, special needs, and English language learner populations. This will provide a more stable and just financial foundation for schools serving the most marginalized students.
2. **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Curriculum:** Mandate the development and integration of curricula that reflect the histories, contributions, and cultures of all racial and ethnic groups. This includes providing extensive professional development for teachers to create inclusive classrooms and evaluate materials for bias. Lessons should move beyond European-centric narratives to include diverse perspectives, making all students feel valued and engaged.
3. **Reform of Disciplinary Practices:** Replace punitive, zero-tolerance policies with restorative justice practices. This involves training staff to address student behavior by understanding its root causes and promoting conflict resolution and community-building, rather than resorting to suspension or expulsion. This strategy will directly combat the "school-to-prison pipeline" and create a more supportive school environment for all students. Data from sources like the American Psychological Association show that Black

K-12 students are 3.8 times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than their white peers, a disparity that must be addressed through systemic change.

4. **Recruitment and Retention of a Diverse Workforce:** Implement strategic initiatives to recruit, hire, and retain teachers and administrators of color. This should include creating mentorship programs, offering competitive compensation, and building a school culture where diverse educators feel supported. A diverse staff provides role models and culturally affirming educational experiences, which benefits all students.
5. **Ongoing Training on Implicit Bias and Microaggressions:** Mandate regular, high-quality professional development for all school staff on implicit bias, microaggressions, and anti-racist pedagogy. This training must be practical, scenario-based, and focused on skill-building to disrupt harmful behaviors and create a truly inclusive school culture. The 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the CDC found that nearly one-third of U.S. high school students (31.5%) experienced racism in school, highlighting the urgent need for staff to be equipped to address and prevent these experiences.

Stakeholders and Their Roles

Achieving racial justice in education is a collective responsibility, requiring coordinated effort from various stakeholders at different levels. Each group plays a critical role in dismantling systemic inequities and fostering inclusive environments.

1. Federal and State Governments:

Role: Develop and enforce anti-discrimination laws, allocate equitable funding, incentivize and support local racial justice initiatives, provide research and data infrastructure, and set national/state standards for culturally responsive education.

Contribution: Crucial for top-down policy mandates and resource provision necessary for large-scale systemic change.

2. Local School Boards and District Administrators:

Role: Translate state and federal policies into actionable local plans, allocate district-level resources equitably, implement anti-racist hiring practices, oversee curriculum development, establish and enforce restorative justice discipline policies, and ensure accountability within their schools.

Contribution: Key decision-makers and resource allocators at the operational level, vital for policy implementation and cultural change.

3. School Leaders (Principals, Assistant Principals):

Role: Champion racial justice initiatives within their schools, foster inclusive school cultures, provide professional development opportunities for staff, model anti-racist behavior, address bias in daily operations, and create safe spaces for students and staff to discuss race and equity.

Contribution: Direct shapers of school climate and implementers of district policy, influencing daily experiences.

4. Teachers and Educators:

Role: Implement culturally responsive pedagogy, address implicit biases in their teaching practices, engage in restorative justice practices, advocate for student needs, foster inclusive classroom environments, and continuously learn about racial equity.

Contribution: Front-line implementers whose daily interactions directly impact student experiences and learning outcomes.

Achieving racial justice in schools transforms the educational landscape to the profound benefit of every student, family, and community, moving beyond mere equality to cultivate environments of true equity and belonging. This comprehensive approach fosters an enriched learning ecosystem where empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives naturally flourish among all learners, fundamentally preparing them for an increasingly interconnected global society. By intentionally dismantling systemic disparities, schools evolve into more vibrant, intellectually stimulating, and inherently harmonious spaces.

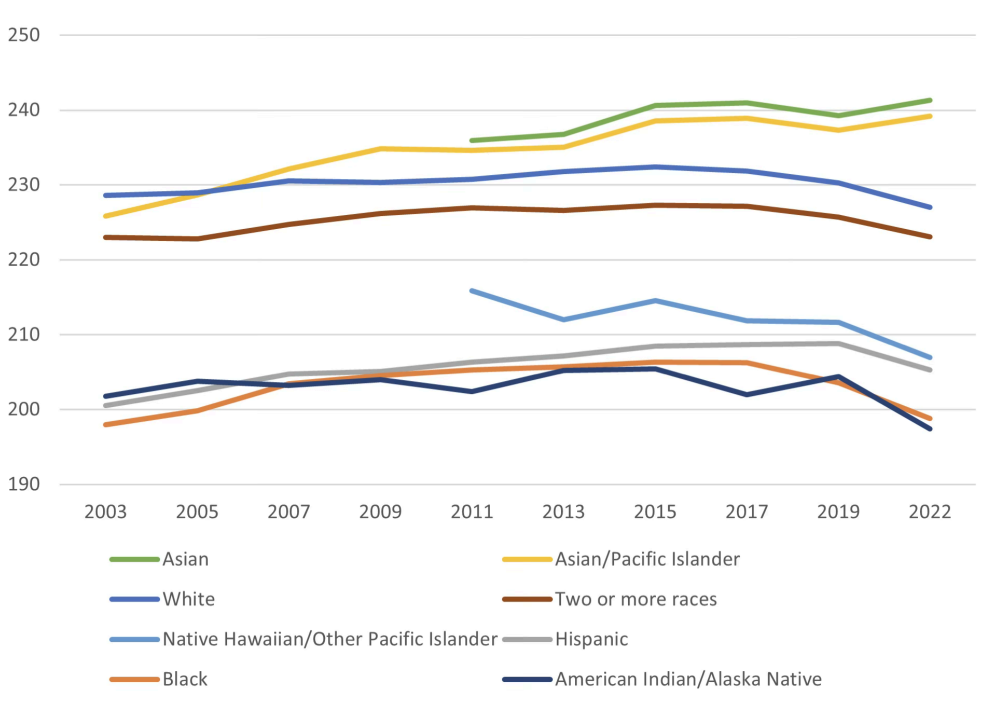
Specifically, the commitment to equitable funding and culturally responsive curricula ensures that all students, regardless of their background or zip code, receive not only the necessary resources but also an education that affirms their identities and broadens their worldviews, leading to deeper engagement and improved academic mastery. Furthermore, a shift towards restorative justice and ongoing anti-bias training fundamentally reconfigures school climate. This creates environments where all students feel genuinely safer, more supported, and are less likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary practices or subtle microaggressions. This enhanced sense of safety and belonging significantly reduces stress, allowing students to focus more effectively on their learning and development. Ultimately, a racially just school empowers every student to fully realize their highest potential, fostering a profound sense of self-worth and community contribution, thereby building a more innovative, resilient, and equitable society for generations to come.

Conclusion

Systemic racism and marginalization within education present an unacceptable barrier to every child's fundamental right to a quality education, rooted in historical injustices and manifesting in ongoing disparities. This policy brief advocates for a proactive, comprehensive overhaul, moving beyond fragmented approaches to dismantle these inequities. By implementing equitable funding, culturally responsive curricula, restorative justice, a diverse workforce, and continuous anti-racism training, we can transform schools into fair, just, and welcoming environments. This commitment is an urgent moral and practical necessity, ensuring every student reaches their full

potential and ultimately enriching society as a whole. The time for genuine systemic change and racial justice is now.

Appendix 1: Academic Achievement Gaps by Race/Ethnicity

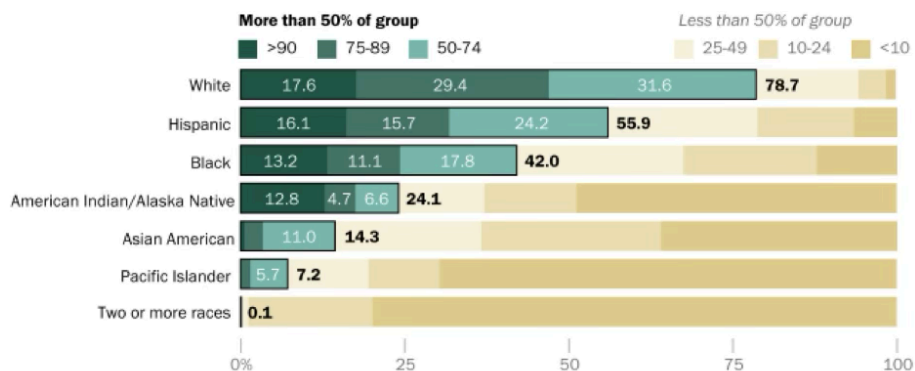


This appendix provides visual representations of average academic performance across different racial and ethnic groups, illustrating the persistent achievement gaps that are a symptom of systemic racism and marginalization within educational systems. It illustrates the long-term trends in average reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for various racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. from 2003 to 2022. It clearly shows a persistent hierarchy in scores, with White and Asian students consistently achieving higher average scores compared to Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. While some groups show slight fluctuations or minor improvements over the nearly two-decade period, the significant gaps between the highest and lowest performing groups remain largely unchanged, underscoring the enduring nature of racial disparities in academic outcomes. This consistency in the gaps, despite various educational reforms over the years, points to deeply embedded systemic issues rather than individual student capacities.

Appendix 2: School Racial Composition Data

U.S. public school students tend to go to schools where their classmates share their racial and ethnic background

Percentage distribution of students in each racial/ethnic group, by % of that racial/ethnic group in the school, 2018-19 school year



Note: Data in this table represents the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data reflects racial/ethnic data reported by schools. Because some schools do not report complete racial/ethnic data, totals may differ from figures in other tables. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. White and Black students are those who report being one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

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This appendix provides data on the racial and ethnic composition of U.S. public schools, highlighting patterns of racial concentration and the extent to which students attend schools where their classmates share their racial or ethnic background. It illustrates the percentage distribution of students in each racial/ethnic group based on the racial composition of their schools during the 2018-19 school year. The chart clearly indicates a strong tendency for racial and ethnic isolation within U.S. public schools. For example, 78.7% of White students attend schools where more than 50% of their classmates are also White, with a significant portion (17.6%) attending schools where over 90% of students are White. Similarly, while less pronounced than for White students, 42.0% of Black students attend schools where more than 50% of students are Black. This data highlights that despite legal desegregation, de facto segregation persists, with a large majority of students attending racially concentrated schools. This pattern of racial clustering contributes to resource inequities, limits cross-cultural interaction, and can perpetuate the marginalization described in the policy brief, as schools with higher concentrations of marginalized students often face greater systemic challenges.

References

1. American Psychological Association – Inequality at School
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/cover-inequality-school> Summary: This APA article explores how racial inequities, driven by implicit biases in educator treatment, lead to a persistent achievement gap for Black students (e.g., 2014 high school graduation rates: Black 73% vs. White 87%). It details disproportionate discipline, underrepresentation in gifted programs, and lower teacher expectations for Black students, contributing to the "school-to-prison pipeline." The article also discusses interventions aimed at reducing bias and supporting educators. Note: Black K-12 students are 3.8 times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than their white peers.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Racism in School & Student Health
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/su7304a4.htm> Summary: Based on the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, this CDC report indicates that nearly one-third of U.S. high school students (31.5%) experienced racism in school, with significantly higher rates among students of color (e.g., 56.9% for Asian students). These experiences were strongly linked to increased poor mental health, suicide risk, and substance use. The report underscores the urgent need for schools to implement anti-racism policies and provide mental health support to create safer environments. Note: Approximately one in three high school students (31.5%) reported experiencing racism in school according to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
3. University of Calgary – Systemic Racism in Canadian Higher Education
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1437706.pdf> Summary: This rapid scoping review analyzed 32 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2022 to explore systemic racism in Canadian higher education. The study reveals that systemic racism continues to manifest through unwelcoming academic cultures and hostilities faced by Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals.
4. Yancy – Systemic Racism & College Choice Decisions
<https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/17445> Summary: This paper aims to explore how systemic racism influences African American students' college choice decisions. It posits that students' perceptions of discrimination and the broader racial climate significantly impact their commitment to higher education, with these factors analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory.
5. United Way NCA – Racial Inequality in Education
<https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/racial-inequality-in-education/> Summary: This United Way NCA blog post explores racial inequality in education, highlighting how historical segregation and persistent systemic barriers lead to disparities for students of color, with schools in predominantly Black and Hispanic communities receiving 16% less funding. It outlines challenges like achievement gaps and the school-to-prison pipeline, advocating for solutions such as culturally responsive teaching and equitable funding.