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Educational Equity Perspectives in Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement: A Road Map for Nevada

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Abstract

Problem. Communities across Nevada call for more equitable practices, especially to reduce contact between communities of color and law enforcement, particularly in the African American community. By increasing our cultural awareness and highlighting the commitment of the state to support an Antiracist Nevada, we foresee a reduction in unrest and an increase in educational outcomes across all student groups. **Purpose.** The purpose of this policy paper is to highlight the importance of addressing racism and racialized bias in education. **Recommendations.** To address the rising need for equity practices and policies in Nevada, we propose six recommendations to acknowledge and address equity and systemic racism issues: Building community legislative task force, addressing hiring practices, diversifying curriculum, increasing professional development, addressing discipline policies in education, clarifying legislation related to restorative justice, and increasing clarity regarding socioemotional learning standards and practices. The following document highlights research and support for these practices and more detail on the practicality of these recommendations.

Introduction

On Memorial Day 2020, the American people bore witness to the undercurrent of a racial divide in our country as unarmed George Floyd died at the hands of law enforcement. In response, social justice organizations such as Black Lives Matter, the American Psychological Association, and the National Education Association called for legal and social action to protect Black citizens' lives. In particular, African American males are underrepresented in prosocial outcomes such as high school graduation rates but over-identified in legal incidences. This shifting dynamic from education to incarceration is better known as the school to prison pipeline.

Black students are 3.9 times more likely to be suspended than White students in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). While Nevada high school graduation rates have risen substantially over the past few years (to 81%), Black students' graduation rate is only 68% compared to 84% for White students (McFarland, Cui, Holmes, & Wang, 2020). Also, White students are 2.1 times more likely than Black students to be enrolled in at

least one AP class in Nevada (Propublica, n.d.). Finally, Nevada ranks in the highest 10% of the country for average arrest per school, referrals to law enforcement, and transfers to alternative schools for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), however these arrest rates are even higher for African American youth (Bittleson, 2020).

It is imperative to examine the policies and practices that have differential impacts on students of color from their white peers. Without academic achievement, Black students' access to resources lessens, which influences their potential to achieve high-earning jobs. Also, without access to high earning jobs, the income/wealth gap will continue to widen. The need to create equity across all races in Nevada is apparent for the benefit of our citizens and the economy. This policy paper aims to highlight the importance of addressing racism and racialized bias in the educational environment. Importantly, it offers six evidence-based strategies and solutions to mitigate bias and increase educational and social outcomes for Black students and the community at large, making Nevada a more welcoming place for us all to call home.

Diverse Collaborations: Six Evidence-Based Strategies to Improve Racial Equity in Education

There is a growing call for the adoption of antiracist principles into educational systems to address these gaps. Antiracist attitudes, values, beliefs, and policies actively challenge individuals and systems to confront commonly accepted attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors and to question and examine how these principles are complicit in promoting the more extensive systemically racist systemic practices. These practices are often rooted in the masking of social capital tied to Whiteness. Whiteness in America was created as a type of property due to a “legal necessity” to separate White people from the enslaved and native people (Harris, 1993). This delineation permitted White people to be judged under a separate, unequal collection of laws and practices from the 17th century to the present. It was through legal means that these practices are ingrained in the fabric of our society and it can be through legislative action that these practices can be rendered defunct. In the spirit of active engagement, we propose the following six policy recommendations:

1. Joint Legislative-Community Committee on Racial Equity. We recommend developing a legislative committee that focuses on racial equity and collaborates with community and family members to grow and sustain practices and policies that highlight equity. The focus of this committee will be to formulate a racial equity impact statement for all legislation that can be shared to highlight the goals of the current legislative session. By acknowledging the current climate the legislative body holds the value of equity as a priority and has a baseline to develop policy over the next several years. Public acknowledgement of harms is the first step in restoration (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007). This public statement could highlight a commitment to improving race relations in Nevada and set the stage for future committee work in building dialogue and progress around race in this state (Sue, 2013).

Second, the committee can further equity and antiracism work through the strategic support of ongoing programming and community focused development. The population of families and community members who serve as schools’ voices are traditionally represented by individuals who main-

tain a certain level of status based on their education, class, socioeconomic status, power, and privilege (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). It is necessary to mitigate potential barriers that may derail the participation of families in the educational process. A strength-based approach that values the contributions (talents, skills, prior knowledge) individuals bring from their diverse cultures and backgrounds can strengthen educational equity practices and prepare a multicultural accepting atmosphere. In short, diversifying voices in educational systems include going into the community, partnering with organizations (non-profits, churches) known to reach populations that are underrepresented in the education systems decision-making processes, and collaborating with various community agencies and universities (private, public, Historical Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions).

The Joint Legislative-Community Committee on Racial Equity may include individuals (i.e., parents from Black communities) and cultural brokers selected by communities who are underrepresented in the educational decision-making process to serve as voting committee members, community-school liaisons, and consultants (Ishimaru et al., 2016). The committee will play a key role in facilitating community educational partnerships. Partnerships can be developed by utilizing marketing announcements (social media, flyers) that highlight the benefits to the community, requesting to speak at common community agencies, attending community events to establish relationships, scheduling community-based meetings with leaders, organizations, and families, and creating structured time for collaboration meetings that include the voices of students. To help build partnerships, educational institutions and government bodies can also provide and fund incentives and the resources (i.e., transportation, childcare, employment opportunities, culturally responsive programming, non-traditional hours to extend educational opportunities and to engage parents) needed for individuals to engage in partnership opportunities. Current systems rely on invisible labor of minority community members to do this work, increasing the burden on these communities without adding additional support (Buckingham, 2018). Educational institutions and government bodies can also leverage trained facilitators (who could also be a part of the joint legislative-community committee) to help them

integrate multicultural competencies, be mindful of the impact of capital (i.e., resources, access, relationships, and experiences influencing one's ability to navigate), and acknowledge areas (micro-aggressions, systemic racism, discrimination, intersectionality, power and privilege, marginalization, stereotypes, cultural discontinuity) that can influence equitable processes (Liu, 2016; Ratts et al., 2016).

Effective community-school-family partnerships have positively influenced students' socio-emotional wellness, academic growth, and career development (Evans, 2013; Sharma, 2018). Additional school-community-family partnerships may include: (a) family psychoeducational groups, (b) student interns in community/government agencies, (c) community financial management speakers and class volunteers, (d) mobile community counseling services combined with school counseling to provide non-traditional group counseling services, (e) community-based school clubs (Griffin & Steen, 2010). Further interventions can include a trade career to college programs that may help students complete certificates (CNA, pharmacy tech, barber, etc.) that can help students have higher pay rates as they maintain college prep courses and transition from high school to their aligned college career goals. Policies regarding students' age may need to be modified to support career opportunities for students' educational and economic development.

2. Representation. We propose intentional hiring practices that ensure greater representation of African American/Black individuals in positions within the K-12 system to include school administrators, teachers, and staff to diversify attitudes, values, beliefs, and policies. While the percentage of non-white students in the U.S. has dramatically increased over the past few decades, the same cannot be said for the percentage of non-white teachers. Only 20% of teachers in the U.S. come from non-white backgrounds, of which 7% identify as Black/African American. Representation is not only crucial for its ability to provide students with role models in the school environment with similar attitudes, values, and beliefs, but it also helps provide advocacy for students of color (Papageorge et al., 2018). Having at least one Black teacher preceding middle school reduces the probability of dropping out of high school by 29% for Black students. Among low-income Black males, hav-

ing a Black teacher reduces their risk for dropping out by 39% and increases their chance to pursue college by 29% (Gershenson et al., 2018). Furthermore, positive relationships with adults involved in the school system—including counselors, teachers, and administrators—have indicated higher academic engagement levels for students (Bottiani et al., 2016), and higher academic engagement is associated with being less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (Lucero, 2015).

There must be intentional efforts to recruit, hire, and retain school personnel of color in Nevada schools. Past research has highlighted strategies such as Grow Your Own (GYO) programs that create elective courses for high school students to introduce them to teaching as a career through an equity and justice lens. Other strategies include creating support groups for teachers of color, creating incentives and hiring packages to further recruit and retain school staff of color, and collecting necessary data to better understand current employees' experiences (Goings et al., 2018).

3. Diversity in Curriculum. The state needs diversity and inclusion in all coursework in all subject matters and all grades. A thorough examination of current "required reading" materials can identify elements that contribute to the larger systemically racist system. These reading materials could be replaced by literature that instead promotes and highlights greater diversification. Research shows that a curriculum that overemphasizes Euro-American perspectives can cause students to disengage from learning (Sleeter, 2011; Wiggan, 2007). Moreover, a well-developed and executed ethnic studies curriculum is linked to academic success and prosocial outcomes for all students (Bowman, 2010; Sleeter, 2011). In fact, a curriculum that mirrors the diversity of students in the classroom is linked to higher academic outcomes and overall empowerment (Chavous et al., 2003).

Strategies to improve diversity in curriculum include: (a) teaching students of historical figures from non-White backgrounds; (b) providing a curriculum that highlights learning about and celebrating non-White and non-dominant historical events and holidays, and (c) providing literature written from non-White perspectives on commonly taught subjects such as social studies and history. Greater diversity of curriculum materials can create greater diversity in perspectives and a greater appreciation for diverse classroom and school perspectives.

4. Professional Development. We must prepare teachers to work with a diverse student body through effective professional development in culturally responsive, antiracist, and implicit bias mitigation. Bias, both implicit and explicit, directly can inflict harm to students and families in our communities. Administrators and teachers have a responsibility to all students, but more importantly, they have a responsibility to create equity inside and outside of the classroom (Garrett, 2009). Given how teacher bias can impact a student's course placement, suspensions, and academic identity, targeted professional development that improves cultural sensitivity and awareness for all school staff and their work with diverse student populations is needed (Lehman, 2017; Washington, 2019). This includes training related to hiring practices (Ford et al., 2004) to teach bias reduction techniques in the school environment (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

While models exist to address these issues in some of our districts through in-house training or community providers on implicit bias and restorative justice practices (Leverett et al., 2019; Song, 2016), there is no policy in place to ensure this work is done systematically across school districts. Uniform implementation and assessment of professional development programs must be implemented to demonstrate a commitment to community equity issues. The outcomes must be tied to the distribution of funds and to the certification of professionals to ensure they are abided.

5. Discipline Policy Reform. Reconciling research with discipline practices and reducing the interaction between students and law enforcement in school spaces is the way forward for equity reform. It is imperative that we find efficient ways to handle behavior concerns without taking children out of school. Additionally, Nevada has been ranked in the top 10% of student arrests, referrals for law enforcement, and transfer to an alternative school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The arrest rate for African American youth in Nevada is higher than the national average despite arrest rates for youth of other races falling below the national average (Bittleston, 2020).

While a student's absence from their normal school routines impacts their academic identity, the negative experiences for racial minorities are reinforced by student-police interactions. Past research has indicated that police and student interactions are associated with internalizing (e.g., iso-

lating) and externalizing (e.g., disengaging, acting out) problems (Mrug & Windle, 2010). Student's awareness of discipline gaps is associated with feelings that school is unfair and unsupportive (Bottiani et al., 2017). Alternatively, past studies have documented positive experiences when intervening with school counselors and others to create a healthier school climate for students (Hernández & Seem, 2004).

Nevada policymakers can make a few changes to the way discipline is managed in schools. First, policy can reflect a commitment to reallocating some resources for school policing towards mental health specialists. The police are quite often called to handle social issues such as mental health or homelessness, that they are not adequately trained to address. However, mental health professionals are specifically trained to handle such situations and can through the formal integration of these services. Second, using in-house strategies instead of police intervention for minor offenses can lead to student success (Schuck, 2017). Removing students from the classroom does not address the origin of the problem and can lead to more negative school system experiences. Learning more effective strategies for teachers, counselors, and administrators can help increase student presence in the classroom, providing them with better opportunities to excel in school. Third, we can align our school discipline policies with restorative justice reforms. Restorative justice policies seek to repair harm in school environments. This starts with clarifying the definition of restorative justice in Sec. 3. Chapter 392 of NRS to recognize the joint responsibility of adults to recognize and repair the harm they have caused during school-based incidents. Currently, the policy puts the onus on the students to repair harm in the school environment. There is no language that asks the adults to repair harm in the event that they are the initiators of the harm. Students are being acted on by the school environment, which can include students and adults alike, and an acknowledgment of this in policy can be a powerful tool towards building community within schools.

6. Data-Driven Decision making for SEL and Mental Health. Socio-emotional learning (SEL) has a positive influence on students' motivation, achievement outcomes, social behaviors, self-esteem, psychological health, and employment trajectory (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015).

SEL can decrease student engagement in at-risk behaviors and recidivism. However, school systems often do not have sufficient SEL data to provide data-driven support to students, particularly those experiencing trauma from exposure to racism and bias. It is important to maintain a continuous data collection process for gathering information pertaining to students' socio-emotional needs and wellness in K-12 school systems to provide data-driven interventions that support student success. This data can help drive additional research about the impact SEL has on marginalized populations and racial inequities (disciplinary data, misdiagnosis, staff-student relationships) (Beyer, 2017; Garner et al., 2014).

Additionally, while educational institutions have begun to implement SEL programs in schools, more explicit policies are needed that identify the primary SEL curriculum, how these components are implemented, who assists with implementation, the roles of each stakeholder in the collaborative multi-tiered systems of support (MTTS), and the required training of SEL instructors particularly in regards to the integration of multicultural education elements. Some states and districts have designed social-emotional learning standards to support the socioemotional development of students. Government policies (i.e., Every Student Succeeds Act, NRS Chapter 388 System of Public Instruction, NRS Chapter 389 Academics and textbooks) may also implicitly discuss the need to provide SEL as a means of creating culturally responsive safe climates that support students' growth and de-

velopment. Legislation can also address the specific curriculum and learning outcomes that qualify for SEL. Identifying specific criteria that meet SEL requirements with special attention to culturally competent practice is critical due to the positive impact SEL has shown on students' development and attainment.

Conclusion

Anti-racist education goes beyond naming racism. It requires an active engagement in the removal of barriers and privilege that suppresses some community members in favor of others. We recommend establishing a legislative committee on racial equity in the Nevada Legislature to review and prepare a racial equity impact statement for all legislation that is reported favorably to the senate. Additionally, by creating more financial incentives to increase representation in the workforce, altering curriculum, and developing programs to increase retention of faculty/staff of color we can begin to see a shift in climate that ensures better outcomes for African American students. We encourage the legislature to also adjust policy to ensure equity in discipline through increasing engagement and addressing gaps in discipline and police interaction. Finally, we argue for additional clarity on existing language regarding SEL standards and requirements. These recommendations provide a way forward through existing best practices in education and antiracist ideology to our current policy and practice. These strategies will create better pathways for all learners and a safe space for our most vulnerable populations.

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