

PROMISING PRACTICES TO BUILD ANTIRACIST AND AFFIRMING SCHOOLS

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Members of Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous communities have been leading efforts to build affirming school environments and culturally responsive and celebratory curriculum for decades. They have also been working to create community-based educational initiatives to expand learning opportunities. Across the state, many students, parents, educators, advocates, and community members are now focusing on making schools antiracist and free from prejudice. These efforts are critical to ensuring a safe, supportive, respectful, and affirming learning environment for children of color.

HOW CAN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES ADDRESS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND CREATE AN AFFIRMING ANTIRACIST CLIMATE?

- **Reform policy to center equity**

Equity-centered [policies](#) can take many forms, including adopting antiracist pedagogy and curriculum, promoting restorative justice practices to respond to student behavior, or supporting the social and emotional needs of students. Some school boards have adopted equity resolutions¹ or commitments² to effectuate schoolwide or districtwide changes to create antiracist school climates. Importantly, the Pennsylvania Department of Education considers equity as one of the values underlying statewide educational goals, and it has created a toolkit for schools to address bias and discrimination “in a proactive manner.”³ Everyone in the school community needs opportunities to learn the skills needed to engage in antiracist behaviors.

- **Adopt culturally affirming curriculum**

Alongside educators who have already successfully implemented historically accurate curriculum that reflects and affirms the diversity of their students and our world, many more educators are working to implement [antiracist curriculum](#) and culturally responsive, “[identity-safe](#)” teaching practices.⁴ Antiracist curriculum teaches students the diverse and impactful contributions of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color while acknowledging historic and structural racism and implicit

bias. Culturally responsive and identity-safe teaching practices support school communities in embracing antiracist principles and encouraging teachers to meaningfully incorporate the student culture into classroom learning.

- **Teach critical race theory**

Some educators are also employing [the principles of critical race theory \(CRT\)](#), which is a well-respected approach to understanding and analyzing the ways that racism is engrained in our everyday experiences in the United States through systems of law, policy, and practice, and the ways that this reality affects how people experience these systems – particularly Black and Brown people and people of color.⁵ Students deserve an accurate curriculum that seeks to dismantle biases. Addressing racism at school requires interventions at the district level, school level, and the individual level. In many districts, the ability to even mention race and racism is actively under attack as decision-makers scramble to preserve and reinforce manifestations of white supremacy and sow disinformation in the education system. Such an effort was attempted in Pennsylvania with [HB 1532](#), which was referred to the House Education Committee on June 7, 2021. Now is the time to ensure these efforts do not take root. Learn more [here](#) about why ELC and other advocacy organizations across the Commonwealth oppose efforts to ban critical race theory and the negative impact of these efforts on children of color and all children. At least one district court recently struck down attempts to ban race-based conversations as violative of the First Amendment and impermissibly vague.⁶

- **Adopt affirming school uniform and grooming policies**

Schools can adopt policies to ensure that students do not miss out on class time or face suspension or expulsion if they are not complying with dress codes or grooming codes that punish or restrict cultural or gender expression. Such restrictive policies create hostile school climates for students and send the message to students that they are unwelcome at school [because of who they are](#). Schools should instead ensure that dress codes and grooming codes affirmatively state that students can wear their hair in culturally expressive ways. Schools should allow students to dress in a way that affirms their gender identity and expression without reference to “boy” or “girl” uniforms that reinforce a fixed, restrictive, and binary approach to gender. Schools should not punish students for how required uniforms fit their bodies. Schools should also provide resources to families who face barriers to purchasing required uniforms. If you need help obtaining a uniform, consider reaching out to your school’s counselor or a teacher you trust.

- **Increase access to culturally affirming mental health supports**

Schools should function as affirming and healing spaces. Many [students require mental health supports](#) to fully access school, particularly in light of the new and

exacerbated challenges caused by COVID-19 and the uptick in incidents of racism and hate in recent years.⁷ Schools should provide school-based professionals to offer mental health supports and services – such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers who are culturally competent and who can address intersecting barriers such as racism, ableism, and sexism that students may in the school community and community at large.

- **Invest in Black girls**

Black girls face especially daunting barriers due to the intersection of systemic racism and sexism endemic in our current education system. Despite being “largely invisible” in the focus of researchers due to systemic racism, we know that Black girls are disproportionately affected by racist and sexist discipline policies.⁸ Absent specific and targeted investments, this outcome will continue to inflict harm on this and future generations of learners. Schools can [invest](#) in efforts supporting specific student populations, such as Black girls, to eliminate barriers to accessing affirming education spaces.

- **Implement restorative justice principles and practices**

Rather than using punitive and exclusionary discipline, schools can instead employ restorative justice principles that allow students to remain in the classroom and learning and that seek to repair harm caused to the school community. Restorative justice policies and practices, which are based in the knowledge and culture of Indigenous peoples, have a history of efficacy and positive outcomes for girls of color, including “school connectedness,” “mental health, resilience, and empowerment,” and “sense of safety and positive school climate.”⁹ To learn more about restorative justice principles, see [González and Epstein, Building Foundations of Health and Wellbeing in School: A Study of Restorative Practices and Girls of Color](#), (2021).

- **Eliminate exclusionary discipline as an acceptable intervention**

Schools should consider banning suspensions and expulsions outright for the majority of behavioral infractions, including repeat behaviors that do not pose a danger to members of the school community. Suspensions can exclude students from valuable learning time for age-appropriate behavior when they should be provided with needed opportunities to learn and grow.¹⁰ Recognizing the negative consequences, several school districts across Pennsylvania have already implemented partial bans on suspensions.¹¹ Even a single suspension can alter the trajectory of a student’s education; suspensions increase the likelihood that a student is forced to repeat a grade, create barriers to graduation, and can push students out of school all together.¹² Suspensions also do not improve the educational environment for the students remaining in the classroom. Studies show that “zero tolerance” and other punitive exclusionary policies do not reduce the student behaviors they seek to control

and fail to improve a sense of safety on campus or foster positive and affirming school environments. Instead, these practices disproportionately harm Black students, LGBTQ students, and students who have disabilities.¹³

- **Remove subjective school discipline from code of conduct**

Schools should eliminate policies that allow exclusion and punishment for vague and age-appropriate behaviors like “disrespectful body language,” “being rude,” and “disorderly conduct” (a term that shares the name of an adult criminal offense). Enforcement of these subjectively defined, prohibited behaviors enables biases held by decision-makers, like adultification, to play out to the detriment of students of color, particularly Black girls. To learn more about the public health crisis of subjective school discipline, see [González, Etow, and De La Vega, School Discipline is a Public Health Crisis, \(2021\).](#)

- **Institute police-free schools**

Schools need to be spaces of learning, support, and healing. Students of color are more likely to attend schools that have a strong law enforcement presence and no school counselors or mental health support professions, due to systemic racism and historic and current disinvestment in Black and Brown communities.¹⁴ Having law enforcement as an ever-present part of a school community undermines all students’ safety overall and their ability to learn. It makes it more likely that students, particularly Black and Brown students, LGBTQIA students, and students with disabilities, will face violence and arrest at the hands of police in school.¹⁵ For example, Black girls face suspension at rates seven times higher and arrest at rates four times higher than their white peers.¹⁶ The issue is not student behavior, as *no evidence exists* that students of color exhibit more age-appropriate misbehavior in school than other student populations.¹⁷ Research *does* consistently show that police in schools undermine safety for students because minor age-appropriate behaviors are met with excessive force and arrest.¹⁸ Exposure to school police can also impact students’ mental health¹⁹ and future educational opportunities, as it decreases graduation and college enrollment rates.²⁰ Police are never appropriate substitutes for trauma-informed responses to age-appropriate behavior or needed mental health or behavioral health supports. Schools instead need to provide adequate access to culturally competent professionals to ensure that students have what they need to learn and thrive. Student-informed groups, including the Philadelphia Student Union and One Pennsylvania, have been leading the charge to call for police-free schools in the commonwealth.

The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness.

ELC's publications provide a general statement of the law. However, each situation is different. If questions remain about how the law applies to a particular situation, contact ELC's Helpline for information and advice – visit www.elc-pa.org/contact or call 215-238-6970 (Philadelphia) or 412-258-2120 (Pittsburgh) – or contact another attorney of your choice.

¹ RACIAL JUSTICE ACTION GROUP, HAVERTOWN COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK FOR THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP (2018), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a858eface8645cabb72cde/t/5adc5d012b6a2829b4c3e7db/1524391803879/H-CAN-Diversity-Inclusion-Report-SDHT-4-19-18.pdf>.

² For example, the School District of Philadelphia recently adopted guardrails to “address racist practices” and effectuate that commitment to “dismantle racist practices” by ensuring that “our students’ potential will not be limited by practices that perpetuate systemic racism and hinder student achievement.” *Goals and Guardrails*, THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA (July 15, 2021), <https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/goals-and-guardrails/>.

³ PA. DEP’T OF EDUC., EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT, PENNSYLVANIA CONSOLIDATED STATE PLAN 5-6, 112 (2019), <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/K-12/ESSA/PennsylvaniaConsolidatedStatePlan.pdf>.

⁴ Identity-safe classrooms are those in which teachers strive to ensure that students feel that their social identity is an asset rather than a barrier to success in the classroom, and that they are welcomed, supported, and valued. Identity-safe teaching practices include a range of strategies including: the arrangement of students and materials, the types of questions directed toward students, cooperative learning activities, student autonomy and non-punitive approaches to dealing with misbehavior. See e.g., Becki Cohn-Vargas, *Identity Safe Classrooms and Schools* (April 20, 2015), <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/identity-safe-classrooms-and-schools>.

⁵ Janel George, *A Lesson on Critical Race Theory*, AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION (2021), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory/. More resources on critical race theory are available [here](#).

⁶ See e.g., *Judge blocks Florida's 'Stop WOKE Act' pushed by Gov. DeSantis* (A.P., August 19, 2022) (discussing ruling by federal district judge blocking Florida’s “stop WOKE law” banning race-based discussions in schools and businesses as unconstitutional under First Amendment), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/judge-blocks-floridas-stop-woke-act-pushed-gov-desantis-rcna43908>.

⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Hate at School Report* (2019), available at <https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/TT-2019-Hate-at-School-Report.pdf>.

⁸ Subini A. Annamma, et al., *Black Girls and School Discipline: The Complexities of Being Overrepresented and Understudied*, 54 URB. EDUC. 211, 213 (2019).

⁹ THALIA GONZÁLEZ & REBECCA EPSTEIN, INITIATIVE ON GENDER JUSTICE & OPPORTUNITY, BUILDING FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN SCHOOL: A STUDY OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND GIRLS OF COLOR 5 (2021), https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/21_COPI_BuildingFoundations_Report_Accessible_Final.pdf.

¹⁰ For an example of a successful non-exclusionary discipline policy, see DENVER PUB. SCH. BD. OF EDUC., *Policy JK-R Student Conduct and Discipline Procedures*, in DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS ADMINISTRATION POLICIES (2021), https://www.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/JK-R-Student_Conduct-Discipline_Procedures_English.pdf; see also YOLANDA ANYON ET AL., SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS: CHANGING THE CULTURE OF DISCIPLINE IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS (2016), <https://portfolio.du.edu/downloadItem/336038>.

¹¹ See e.g., Policy 218, Pittsburgh Public Schools (banning suspensions and expulsions for nonviolent infractions for students below grade 3),

<https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=ATMRTE6C5CCE>.

¹² U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS, BRIEFING REPORT: BEYOND SUSPENSIONS: EXAMINING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES AND CONNECTIONS TO THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR WITH DISABILITIES 4 (July 23, 2019),

<https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/2019/07-23-Beyond-Suspensions.pdf>.

¹³ PA. ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS, DISPARATE AND PUNITIVE IMPACT OF EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES ON STUDENTS OF COLOR, STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND LGBTQ STUDENTS IN PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS 1 (2021),

<https://www.usccr.gov/files/2021/04-09-Pennsylvania-Public-Schools.pdf>.

¹⁴ THE ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, WE CAME TO LEARN: A CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS 42 (2018),

<https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html>.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 12.

¹⁶ MISHA N. INNISS-THOMPSON, NATIONAL BLACK WOMEN’S JUSTICE INSTITUTE, SUMMARY OF DISCIPLINE DATA FOR GIRLS IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE 2013-14 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION 5 (2017),

https://www.acsa.org/application/files/5215/0532/2372/NBWJI_Fact_Sheet_090917FINAL.pdf.

¹⁷ THE ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, WE CAME TO LEARN: A CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS 44 (2018),

<https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html>.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 38.

¹⁹ Thalia González, *Race, School Policing, and Public Health*, 73 STANFORD LAW REVIEW ONLINE 180 (May 2021), <https://review.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/06/73-Stan.-L.-Rev.-Online-180-Gonzalez.pdf>.

²⁰ Emily K. Weisburst, *Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline and Long-Term Educational Outcomes*, 38 JOURNAL OF POLICY ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT 338, 339 (2019), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pam.22116>.