



# FACT SHEET

## PROMISING PRACTICES TO BUILD ANTI-RACIST AND AFFIRMING SCHOOLS

August 2021

### HOW CAN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES ADDRESS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION?

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 anti-racist and free from prejudice. These efforts are critical to ensuring a safe, supportive, respectful, and affirming learning environment for children of color. Here are some examples of their anti-racist initiatives:

- **Reform policy to center equity:** For example, some school boards have adopted equity resolutions<sup>1</sup> or commitments<sup>2</sup> to effectuate schoolwide or districtwide changes to create anti-racist school climates. Everyone in the school community needs opportunities to learn the skills needed to engage in anti-racist behaviors.
- **Adopt culturally affirming curriculum:** Many teachers are working to build anti-racist curricula that teach students accurate histories of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color, including the diverse and impactful contributions of Black and Brown people, leaders, and thinkers while acknowledging historic and structural racism and implicit bias and promoting practices to enhance awareness and support school communities to live out anti-racist principles.
- **Teach critical race theory:** 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.<sup>3</sup> Students deserve 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 recently 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 don't take root. Learn more [here](#) about why ELC and other advocacy organizations across the Commonwealth oppose efforts to prohibit critical race theory and the negative impact of these efforts on children of color and all children.

- **Adopt affirming school uniform and grooming policies:** Schools can adopt policies to ensure that students don't 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 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 that face barriers to purchasing required uniforms. If you need help accessing 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 can address intersecting barriers such as racism, ableism, and sexism that students may be facing in the school community and community at large.
- **Invest in Black girls:** Black girls are among the least well-served groups of students due to the intersection of systemic racism and sexism endemic in our current education system. Absent specific and targeted investments, this outcome will continue to harm this generation of learners and many more.

Schools can make [investments](#) in 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.”<sup>5</sup> To learn more about restorative justice principles, see [Gonzales 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 outright for the majority of behavioral infractions, including repeat behaviors that don’t pose a danger to members of the school community, to make sure students are not excluded from valuable learning time for age-appropriate behavior and are instead provided with needed opportunities to learn and grow. Several school districts across Pennsylvania have implemented partial bans on suspensions. Studies have shown that “zero tolerance” and other punitive exclusionary policies do not reduce the student behaviors they seek to control, fail to improve a sense of safety on campus, and do not foster positive and affirming school environments. Instead, these practices disproportionately harm Black students, LGBTQ students, and students who have disabilities in Pennsylvania and across the country.<sup>6</sup>
- **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 [Gonzalez, 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> For example, Black girls face suspension at rates seven times higher and arrest rates four times higher than their white peers.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Research *does* consistently show that police in schools undermine safety for students because minor age-appropriate behaviors are met with excessive force and arrest.<sup>11</sup> Exposure to school police can also impact students' mental health<sup>12</sup> and future educational opportunities, as it decreases graduation and college enrollment rates.<sup>13</sup> 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 across Pennsylvania, like Philadelphia Student Union and One Pennsylvania have been leading the charge to call for police-free schools in the Commonwealth.

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<sup>1</sup> RACIAL JUSTICE ACTION GROUP, HAVERFORD COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK FOR THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP (2018), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a858efeace8645cabb72cde/t/5adc5d012b6a2829b4c3e7db/1524391803/879/H-CAN-Diversity-Inclusion-Report-SDHT-4-19-18.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> 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), available at <https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/goals-and-guardrails/>.

<sup>3</sup> Janel George, *A Lesson on Critical Race Theory*, AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION (2021), available at [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory/](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](#).

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

<sup>5</sup> 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), available at [https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/21\\_COPI\\_BuildingFoundations\\_Report\\_Accessible\\_Final.pdf](https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/21_COPI_BuildingFoundations_Report_Accessible_Final.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> PENNSYLVANIA 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), available at: <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2021/04-09-Pennsylvania-Public-Schools.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> THE ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, WE CAME TO LEARN: A CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS 42 (2018), available at <https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>9</sup> 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), available at

[https://www.acsa.org/application/files/5215/0532/2372/NBWJI\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_090917FINAL.pdf](https://www.acsa.org/application/files/5215/0532/2372/NBWJI_Fact_Sheet_090917FINAL.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> THE ADVANCEMENT PROJECT, WE CAME TO LEARN: A CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS 44 (2018), available at <https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 38.

<sup>12</sup> Thalia González, *Race, School Policing, and Public Health*, 73 STANFORD LAW REVIEW ONLINE 180 (May 2021), available at <https://review.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/06/73-Stan.-L.-Rev.-Online-180-Gonzalez.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> 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), available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pam.22116>.